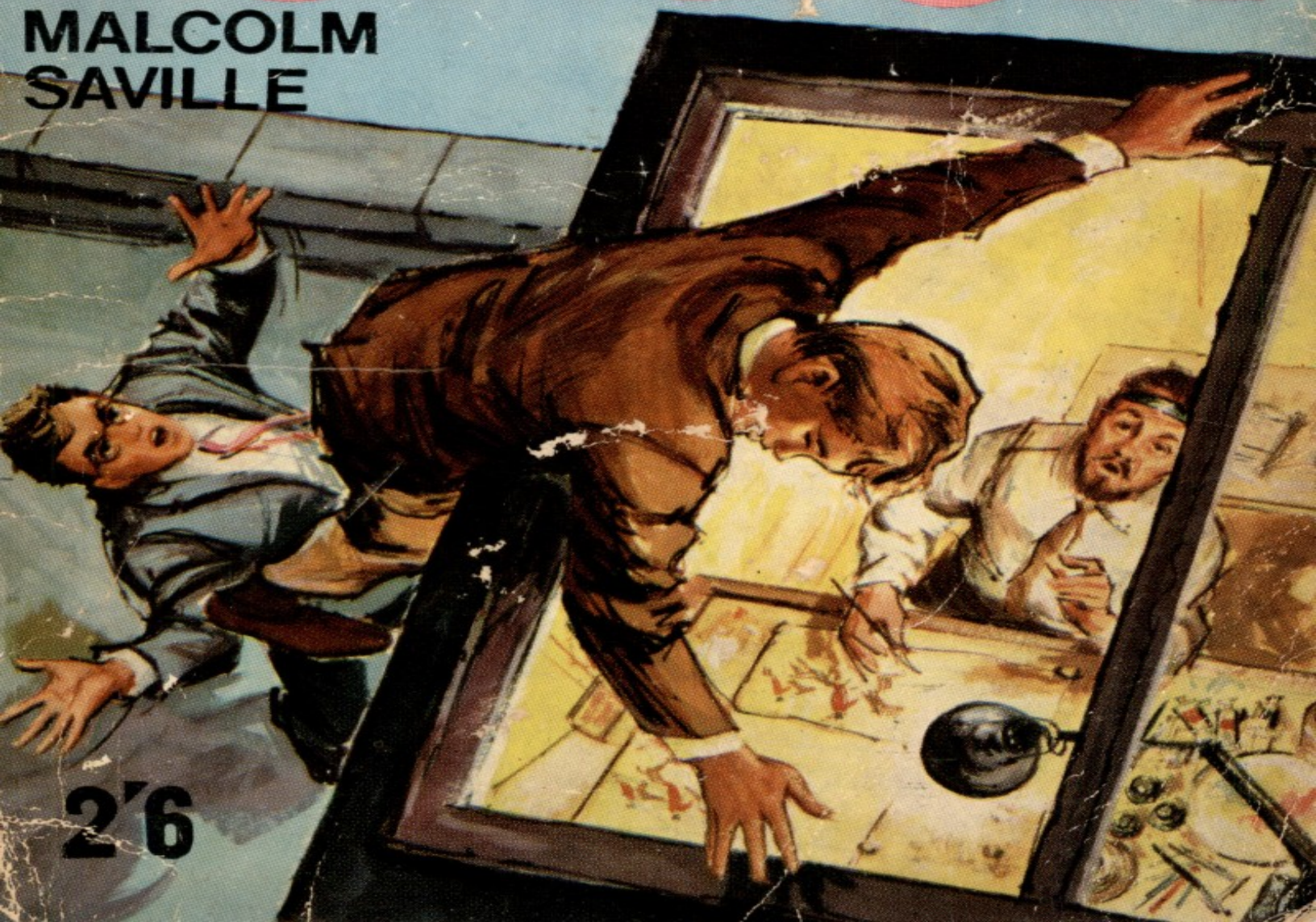




ARMADA
PAPERBACKS for
Boys & Girls

Lone Pine London

MALCOLM
SAVILLE



2'6

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Lone Pine London

Malcolm Saville

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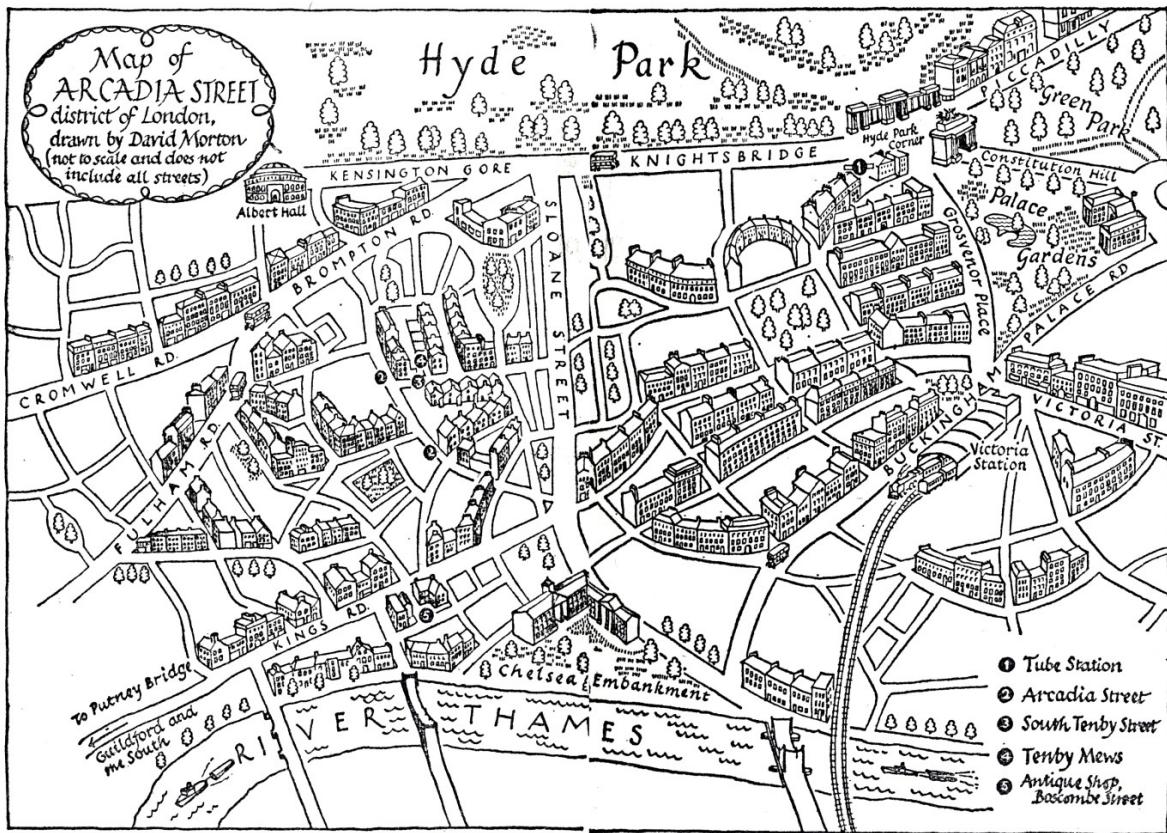
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Foreword

This is the tenth adventure of the members of the Lone Pine Club and, for the first time, the mystery which they help to solve is centred in London.

Although some real places are mentioned by name, please understand that so far as I know there is no Brownlow Square or Holloway Hill in north London, nor an Arcadia Street nor South Tenby Street in the West End. I hope there is no smart dress shop called "Christabel" either in London or in Guildford where the Lone Piners dash at the end of the story.

All the people in this story are imaginary and although if you come to London you can certainly explore Chelsea and Fleet Street and the Tottenham High Road, none of the antique shops I have described really exist, and if there are any like them that is only a coincidence. The street map at the beginning of the book won't help you to find your way about, but I hope they will enable you to see where the Lone Piners played out their desperate game against an old enemy.

M. S

The Lone Pine Club

Although this story is complete in itself it is about some members of the Lone Pine Club who have had many previous adventures described in this series. You may enjoy this book more if you know something about these boys and girls before you begin, although not all of them appear in this story.

The club was founded at a lonely house called Witchend in the heart of the Shropshire hills.

The rules of the Lone Pine Club are still kept hidden under the solitary pine tree in their first secret camp. They are very simple and are set out in full in *Mystery at Witchend*, which is the first story about the Lone Piners. The most important of these rules is really the oath which each member signed in his or her own blood - *Every member of the Lone Pine Club signed below swears to keep the rules and to be true to each other whatever happens always.*

It is true that the Lone Piners have the happy knack of finding adventures, but as they live many miles apart and go to different schools they are only able to meet in the holidays. The exception is Tom Ingles, who works on his uncle's farm near Witchend which belongs to the Mortons who live in London. The original headquarters of the club is still the old camp, with its sentinel pine tree on the slope of the hill above the house, but other camps have been established as necessity arose - one in the barn at a lonely farmhouse called Seven Gates, near the rugged range of hills called the Stiperstones, and another at the ruined castle of Clun farther south, near the Welsh border.

Although they don't have much opportunity of using it in this story the Lone Piners' secret signal to each other is a whistled imitation of the peewit's plaintive call.

THE MEMBERS

DAVID MORTON is sixteen. He was elected captain of the club when it was first founded. He goes to boarding school and used to live on the outskirts of London. Just before this story opens the Morton family moved into Brownlow Square in north London. David has made a good leader for, although he is not very impetuous, he never loses his head in a crisis and the others trust him. He is not particularly brainy but above the average at school work and games, and never really happier than when he is in the country and at Witchend in particular.

RICHARD ("DICKIE") MORTON AND MARY MORTON are ten-year-old twins. They now go to different boarding schools, but are inseparable out of term. Although they are the youngest members of the club and sometimes extremely irritating to the others, they have proved their worth in all the Lone Piners' adventures. They are astonishingly alike in looks and speech and if Mary's hair was cut as short as her twin's even their mother would find it difficult to tell them apart. They have a maddening trick of pretending to be younger than they are and when in action together they annoy most grown-ups. They get their own way too often, but they are warm-hearted, loyal and courageous and will tackle anything to justify themselves to the other members of the club who forgive them much for David's sake.

JONATHAN WARRENDER is a few months older than David. He is tall and bespectacled and one of those boys who find exams easy. Like most clever boys, he has not very much to say. He has no father, is still at boarding school, and lives in the holidays with his mother, who owns the *Gay Dolphin* hotel in the little town of Rye, where he first met the Mortons and had an adventure with them. It is not much wonder that he sometimes wearies of the twins for he is the oldest member of the club. One of the very nicest things about him is that he never suggests in any way to the others that he's too old for the Lone Pine Club. Even if sometimes he treats it with tolerant amusement he values the friendship of the other members and revels in adventure.

PENELOPE ("PENNY") WARRENDER is Jon's cousin and nearly one year younger. Her parents are abroad and she lives at the *Gay Dolphin* in the holidays. She is grey-eyed and red-headed, with all the qualities and

defects that go with red hair - affectionate and impetuous, loyal and independent and a rare fighter for her friends and for what she believes to be right. Penny could never be described as a scholar, but she is quick-witted and intelligent and a splendid companion. In many ways she is old for her years, and for as long as she can remember the most important person in her short and exciting life, after her parents she so rarely sees, has been her cousin Jonathan. She teases and often infuriates him, but although she has not yet admitted it to herself she would follow him to the end of the world.

The other members of the club do not appear in this story, but you may like to know something about them.

PETRONELLA ("PETER") STERLING is the vice-captain of the Lone Piners. She is sixteen and has no mother, brothers or sisters. She lives with her father, who is in charge of a reservoir in the Shropshire hills in a tiny house called Hatchholt, near Witchend. She has been to London once and hated it, for she is happiest when roaming her beloved hills on her pony, Sally. Imagine her as tall and slim with two fair plaits which she refuses to cut off, blue eyes and a clear brown skin. She is loved and admired by everyone who knows her. David Morton is her special friend.

JENNY HARMAN is nearly fifteen. She is a native of Shropshire and lives in a lonely village in the hills so the others do not see her very often. Peter befriended Jenny when she was in great trouble, but although the others tease her a little, she has plenty of pluck and does not mind what anyone else says or does so long as Tom will stand by her.

TOM INGLES is nearly sixteen. He is a Cockney, but is now settled for good on his uncle's farm quite close to Witchend. Everybody likes Tom, who is intensely proud of his membership of the club although he will never admit it. He will always stand by Jenny.

1. Fog

Jonathan Warrender first noticed the man with the light-coloured, belted coat and the checked cap when the latter lit a little black cigar. He puffed out the strong-smelling smoke so that it blew across Jon's face and made him cough. There wasn't much that Jon could do about it because he couldn't move his elbows or his feet. He was, in fact, a very insignificant unit in a swaying, expectant crowd of nearly fifty thousand football fans crammed into one of the most famous arenas in north London. Jon was crushed against a horizontal bar on the concrete terraces above the playing pitch and he wasn't enjoying himself very much.

At sixteen and a half Jon was the sort of boy who is willing to try anything once. He had an enquiring mind, liked to find out things for himself and would go to a lot of trouble and inconvenience to do so. He was at White Hart Lane, London, on this cold, dull Saturday afternoon just after Christmas because of an argument with David Morton. With his red-headed cousin Penny, Jon was staying with the Mortons who had just moved from the suburbs to an old house in shabby Brownlow Square, somewhere between Islington and Finsbury Park. David, who preferred cricket, had said that professional football wasn't really a game but only an entertainment. Jon, much more cautious and in a rather superior way, had replied that as he lived at Rye, on the edge of Romney Marsh, he had never seen a first-class professional match and wasn't prepared to give an opinion until he had. And that was why, rather reluctantly, he found himself wedged in an enormous crowd waiting for the game to start.

Everything would have been much more amusing if David had been with him, but as he had promised to help his father, Jon had been persuaded to take this opportunity of seeing the mighty Spurs play before their own supporters. No sooner had he decided to go than Penny asked him to take her to the cinema, and when he tried to explain that he would have to postpone that pleasure, she had given him her opinion on professional football which was even more unfavourable than David's.

Then the ten-year-old Morton twins, Richard and Mary had offered to come with him. Mary had added that she was sure they would be able to cheer his weary journey. When he had declined this offer the twins said that they had always known how much he hated them, and that ever since Penny and he had arrived two days ago, they had been wondering why their parents' invitation had included Jon.

Jon was tall for his age, with a thatch of untidy, fair hair and spectacles. Although lanky, he was tough enough, but had been realizing for the last half-hour that he did not like crowds. This afternoon's experience was new to him. He rarely came to London and although he had stayed with the Mortons once before, he knew nothing about the sprawling maze of streets stretching out towards the northern heights in which his friends now lived.

A band was playing in front of the big stand on the opposite side of the ground. The pitch was not very green and there wasn't much grass round the goal posts, shining so clean and white against the background of more roofed terraces which by now were nothing but a misty blur of faces.

Jon rammed his hands into the pockets of his duffle coat and was just wondering whether Penny had gone to the pictures by herself when the man directly in front of him lit his nasty little cigar. A cheerful Cockney in a cap and muffler wedged against Jon sniffed loudly and said, "Watcher burning, mate? Bit of ole sock?"

The man turned and snapped something about minding his own business. For a second he caught Jon's eye and the boy glimpsed a sallow, mean, clean-shaven face under the cap with a big brim.

The band retired and another, greater clamour rose to the sullen, wintry sky as the home team in their white shirts and black shorts came out and practised with another yellow ball. Bells rang, rattles clacked and with yells of "Up the Lilywhites" the crowd swayed forward again, and Jon was pressed hard against the crush-bar. After that he forgot the passing of time, for this match was a great one. Here, between two well-matched teams of experts, was real artistry and Jon had never before seen football of this quality. The red and whites seemed bigger and more robust and at first they were faster, too. After twenty minutes they scored the first goal. An almost

uncanny silence followed and then as the Spurs kicked off the great crowd began to shout its encouragement.

This was the famous Tottenham roar, which grew and grew in volume as their favourites swept to the attack. The equalizing goal came soon afterwards and the roar from the crowd was now continuous. Jon shouted, too. These Spurs were wonderful for they had made an art as well as a science of football, and when the whistle went for half-time he could hardly find his voice to answer the cheery little Cockney beside him when he said, "Not so bad today are they, mate...? Don't like the look of the wevver... Fog's coming down."

Jon nodded and croaked a reply. He looked round in vain for the little man in the light coat with his evil-smelling cigar and supposed that he had managed to move farther away. Then he glanced across the pitch and realized with a shock that the light was going fast and that a yellow fog was settling slowly down over the arena.

He sniffed and then coughed as the fog took him by the throat. Under the flood-lights the players now made patterns almost like dancers on a stage, but still came the roar from the terraces until the Spurs equalized again and scored the winning goal in the last five minutes, by which time the sky had been blotted out

"Cheerio, mate," the Cockney grinned as the final whistle blew. "Be seeing you," and then Jon found himself swept away from the protection of the crush-bar as the crowd surged towards the exits.

He didn't like this, and when he was pushed hard in the back and turned to protest, a big man with a dirty choker round his neck sneered, "Pick your feet up, smarty. Keep moving." Suddenly he hated the crowd and all the drab clothes and pale faces with drooping cigarettes and shuffling feet as they pressed round him and hemmed him in. There was no way for him to go except the crowd's way, and in a panic he realized that he had never before experienced such a feeling of helplessness. The swirling fog and the tang of tobacco smoke made him cough and his feet were still numb with cold as the crowd carried him out into a narrow street which he did not

recognize. He wondered for a moment whether he had come out of the other side of the ground by mistake.

The street lamps were on now and he stopped under one and felt in his pocket for the scrap of paper which David had given him. The instructions were written in pencil and as Jon held the paper under the light he was jostled so that he stumbled forward and banged his head on the lamp-post. In sudden anger he turned and found himself staring at the mean face of the little man in the light-coloured coat.

"Steady on," Jon said, as he rubbed his forehead. "No need to shove like that, is there?" But after a quick glance at him the man hurried on and Jon peered at his precious paper again.

"Coming back, walk half a mile up the High Road to the *Eagle and Child* and pick up bus 366 marked Finsbury Park," he read with difficulty. There were more directions after that but finding the *Eagle and Child* would be enough to keep him busy for a while. He didn't know where the High Road was, but with any luck this street would lead him into it. His luck held. An orange glow in the fog ahead and the muffled roar of traffic were very welcome as the crowd slowed down at the road junction. A long queue of red buses held up by a policeman loomed through the fog. Bright lights from shop windows spilled on to the crowded pavements, and Jon was shoved and buffeted as the crowd rushed for the buses.

In bewilderment, Jon backed across the pavement towards a greengrocer's shop, stumbled over the threshold against a crate of oranges and clutched at a woman with a scarf over her head.

"Now then, young man, what's all this in aid of?" she said, and then laughed when she saw his worried face.

Jon apologized. "I'm sorry. Somebody shoved me. Truth is, I'm lost. Can you tell me how to get to the *Eagle and Child*, please. I want a 366 bus."

"Never heard of it, lad. But Mr. Collins will know. Ask him," and she nodded towards the big, red-faced man who was weighing out potatoes for another customer at the back of the shop.

"Been to the match, son?" Mr. Collins said as he wiped his hands on his apron. "Good game, I hear. What can I do for you?"

Jon explained again. 'I've never been here before and I don't know where I am. It's the *Eagle and Child* I want. I've got to catch a bus there."

Mr. Collins stroked a magnificent moustache thoughtfully and Jon's heart sank. Perhaps David had made a mistake? But that was silly because he had got off there on the way to the ground.

"*Eagle and Child*, eh?"

"About half a mile up the High Road, I believe, but I don't know whether to turn left or right now. I'm sure it was the *Eagle and Child*."

A happy smile creased Mr. Collin's genial face. "Bless you, boy! You mean the *Dithering Duck*. O' course you do. Joe Martin's place. There's nobody round here calls old Joe's the *Eagle and Child*. Bless my soul! *Eagle and Child*, indeed!"

"Thank you very much, but how do I get there?"

"Turn left outside and keep walking. If this fog gets any worse you'll have a job to find it... Decent game, wasn't it? Lucky they could finish it."

So Jon went out into the cold again, turned left and found himself still jostled by the home-going crowd that was mingling with the Saturday afternoon shoppers. The noise of the passing traffic and the hoots of impatient drivers were muffled by the fog and as Jon hurried on with his chilled hands deep in the pockets of his coat he thought longingly of the Mortons' untidy, cosy sitting-room at 7, Brownlow Square, where perhaps they were all now sitting round the fire munching toast.

He was just dodging a worried mother hurrying home with a pram when he suddenly smelled the strong scent of a cigar, and in the glaring light from the windows of a radio shop he saw again the slim, sallow little man a few paces ahead. He, too, had his hands in his pockets and looked neither to right nor left as he hurried forward as if he knew where he was going.

For no particular reason Jon felt uneasy about this man. It wasn't that he recognized him, nor even that the man reminded him particularly of anybody, but he felt that he didn't want to pass him. There had been something odd about the way in which this stranger had looked at him at the match and Jon couldn't forget it. The frenzied hooting of cars suggested that they were near traffic lights. The pavements were not so crowded now and Jon looked up to see a garish public house. It was the *Eagle and Child* and just round the corner he saw a long queue at the bus stop. As he stood behind a fat woman with a basket he noticed that the sallow man was four paces ahead in the queue. He was still smoking. Jon could smell him.

He wondered whether all these people were waiting for the 366 bus and asked the woman with the basket.

"That's right, love. Supposed to run every ten minutes but they'll be stopping 'em if this fog gets any worse. Can't blame the drivers, can you, duck?"

It was so dark and foggy now that Jon did not even recognize this as the place at which he got off the bus a few hours ago. He looked again at David's directions and with difficulty read, "Ask conductor of 366 to put you down at Hilgay Crescent and wait there for a 401 which will bring you to the *Saracen's Head*. You know where you are then."

Then the first bus - a single-decker - drew up. The driver got down and argued with his conductor and an inspector. The bus filled up and the light-coated man missed it by three places. The driver agreed to try another journey and two small boys in the front of the queue cheered as he climbed into his seat again. Jon pulled his coat collar round his ears and stamped his frozen feet. The queue lengthened and the inspector told them he didn't know when the next bus would arrive or whether it would go any farther. The woman with the basket drifted off into the fog and Jon moved up one place nearer the man he couldn't lose. He didn't know how he was going to get back to Brownlow Square if there wasn't a bus, for he would certainly never find the way on foot by himself. He was wondering whether he had enough money to pay for a taxi if he could find one, when another bus arrived. The driver got down, wiped his face and lit a cigarette while the inspector counted the people in the queue.

"Last tonight," he said. "Just room for you all, so hop in."

Jon found himself two seats behind the sallow man, who settled down to read an evening paper. At last the bus started, but it was soon obvious that progress was going to be very slow.

When Jon asked for Hilgay Crescent, the slim man turned round and gave him the most curious look and then glanced quickly back to his paper. Jon failed to hear what he said to the conductor when asked for his fare. Ten minutes later the bus pulled up behind another and the conductor called, "Hilgay Crescent and a 401 waiting." Jon scrambled out, climbed to the top deck of the other bus and settled down in the front seat. He was cold and hungry now and was amazed to find that it was just after six o'clock. As the bus started he remembered the mysterious man and looked to see if he was sitting behind him, but he was alone on the top deck.

The roads now seemed to be deserted. Lighted windows in the houses and street lamps looking like orange balloons suspended in the murky blackness passed in slow procession as the bus crawled forward. When the conductor came up and Jon asked for the Saracen's Head the man said, "Take a fourpenny, son. We'll never get there tonight. Crazy to start we were."

Even while he was speaking the fog, thick and yellow under the feeble glow of a street lamp, seemed to close round them with silent hatred. The bus stopped under the lamp and the driver switched off the engine.

The conductor clattered downstairs, ran round to speak to his mate and then called, "Sorry, all! Can't go no farther. Charlie's had enough and I don't blame him... Sorry and all that. All off, if you please."

This was what Jon had been dreading. He started down the stairs and was just in time to see the slim man in the cap stepping off into the fog. So they had travelled on the same bus again! On sudden impulse he shouted, "Can you tell me how far I am from the Saracens Head? I want Brownlow Square."

The man turned in surprise but did not even answer as the fog swallowed him up, and Jon was alone on the pavement. The conductor and driver lit

cigarettes and sat inside the bus. They were as helpful as they could be and told him that they were still a mile from the Saracen. Neither of them had heard of Brownlow Square.

Jon thanked them and looked round to see if there was anyone about who would walk with him. All was quiet. The three cars which had been following the bus had crawled ahead on their own. The fog, sour and dirty, stung his nose and throat as, rather helplessly, he started off to find the *Saracen's Head*. With his left hand touching the walls and gates of the houses he managed to keep on the pavement and make fairly steady progress. Once a man with an electric torch coming in the opposite direction blundered into him and told Jon that he was only a few hundred yards from the *Saracen's Head*. Here he found a policeman, reported the stranded bus and asked the way to Brownlow Square. Although he repeated the rather complicated directions twice and started off more confidently up the hill he was soon lost in a maze of small roads. He knew that he must keep going up hill and remembered that the Square could be approached by three roads, all which looked alike.

He had just decided to ask for help at the next house when he realized that he was on the level and that the fog was not so thick. He could even see the glow of a street lamp about fifteen yards ahead. He stopped for a moment because he had a stitch and heard footsteps in front of him.

"Hullo there!" he shouted desperately. "Wait for me, whoever you are... I'm lost."

The footsteps stopped for a moment, and as Jon hurried forward he saw the shadowy shape of a man loom out of the fog into the glow of the street lamp. The man was small and wearing a light-coloured belted coat with a large cap.

With a sudden stab of fear Jon knew that it couldn't be anybody else than the sallow-faced stranger whom he had first seen on the Spurs ground, stood by in the bus queue, and who had followed him on to the second bus and stayed near him all the way from the *Saracen's Head*. Jon by now was prepared to believe that he was going to 7, Brownlow Square and that if he followed him he would be led there!

"Wait for me," he shouted. "I'm lost."

At once the stranger turned and ran off into the fog. His quick, half-muffled footsteps suggested that he knew where he was going. There was no hesitation about them.

In a sudden blind rage Jon ran forward, determined to catch the stranger. Why should the man haunt him like this? Why should he run off when asked for help? It was almost that curious feeling of "this has happened to me before." But why should this nasty little man refuse him help now?

"Wait for me!" he yelled again. "Wait for me. I want Brownlow Square."

Suddenly something vast loomed at him out of the fog. It was a tree on the edge of the pavement. He swerved to avoid crashing into it, stumbled, felt himself falling, clutched at the wall on his left and grazed his hand as he crashed to the pavement. For a moment, half-stunned, bruised and breathless he lay still listening to the receding footsteps of the man who had deliberately refused to help him. Soon all was silent in the clammy fog but for the thudding of his heart.

Slowly he got to his feet. He felt sick and cold. Blood was oozing from his grazed hand and he knew that his right knee was badly bruised. Almost without realizing what he was doing, he stumbled forward for twenty yards until he came to another road. A glow from an uncurtained window on the other side made him realize how stupid he had been not to ask for help at the nearest house.

He crossed the street and saw that the light was showing through a glass transom above a door. Next to the door was some sort of shop window, but Jon was feeling too wretched to examine it as he lifted the old-fashioned knocker and thumped it hard. He leaned against the doorpost and sucked the blood from his hand, wondering if everybody in London went to bed at seven o'clock when there was a fog.

He knocked again and heard footsteps coming downstairs and then down the hall. The door opened a few inches and a girl's voice said,

"Who is it and what do you want?"

Jon explained. "I'm lost. I'm staying in Brownlow Square. Do you know where it is?"

The door opened and Jon saw a slim girl of about twelve staring at him with wide grey eyes. She was pale, with dark, untidy hair kept in place with a narrow velvet band.

"But you're hurt," she whispered. "There's blood on your face... Come in and I'll tell Grandpa."

Jon stepped thankfully over the threshold, though he didn't want to meet anybody's grandfather. All he wanted to do was to get home.

"Thanks very much," he said. "All I want to know is where I am. I'll be all right. Just had a tumble."

The girl smiled and looked much nicer.

"You're very near the Square. Just up this road and then down Kingsley Road on the right and you're in Brownlow Square. Do you live there?"

"I'm staying at number seven with friends. Only been there two days. Thanks for your help. I'll be all right now."

"Wait a sec. for me and I'll guide you. I'll get a coat and torch and tell Grandpa... I'd love to come really... It would be an adventure for me and I know the way quite well although I'm only a visitor here, too... Please wait."

Jon waited. He wondered what she meant by being a visitor.

She was down again in a few minutes in a coat and with a scarf round her head.

"He doesn't mind," she said as she opened the front door. "He's got the telly on but he says to be careful. This is my Grandpa's shop. His name is Albert Sparrow and we sell all sorts of old things, like pictures and books and

china and glass and furniture. I come and stay with him most holidays and help him look after the shop because he's lonely. My name is Harriet Sparrow. What's yours? You're rather big. Are you about twenty?"

Jon told her his name but didn't answer the last question as she took his arm and shone the beam of her torch on the curb.

"Don't you worry any more," she said in a motherly sort of way. "You'll soon be home. Fancy you getting lost... Been to see the Spurs play? What a funny thing to do... This is where we turn right... Who are the people you're staying with? Is there anybody of our age, I mean?"

Jon was a little out of his depth. Harriet was rather overwhelming. Before he could think of a suitable answer there came through the fog the sound of a bell. Not a church bell or the striking of a clock, but the sort of hand-bell which is sometimes rung to summon people to a meal. They stood on the pavement and then, to his amazement, Jon heard somebody calling his name.

"Search party out for Jonathan Warrender! Oyez! Oyez! Calling Jonathan Warrender."

"Why, that's you!" Harriet gasped. "You must be important... I s'pose I don't matter now but all the same I did rescue you... You'd better shout and I'll go back."

"No, you don't. Those are my friends, the twins from Brownlow Square, and you must stay and meet them and then we'll go back with you... *Here I am, twins... Coming!*"

It was a strange meeting in the fog. The Morton twins, Dickie and Mary, were with their father. Dickie had the bell and his sister a bicycle lamp and they were both wearing duffle coats with hoods over their heads. When they saw Jon and Harriet they let go their father's hands and ran towards them.

"It was the bell that did it, wasn't it, Jon?" Dickie said. "It was my idea. Where have you been?"

"Good show, Jon," Mr. Morton said. "We've been fussing about you. No buses, I suppose. Who's this?"

Jon explained, while Harriet and the twins examined each other critically with the help of their torches.

Mr. Morton thanked Harriet and insisted on going back with her first. At her door she turned and said,

"Please come and see me again, some of you. If you don't come I shall know where to find you. Come and see our shop. You'll like the things we keep there."

"We'll come tomorrow," Mary promised. "Soon as the fog has gone. We'll all come. Now we must retrace our weary steps and care for poor Jonathan."

It was too dark to see Harriet's face, but they heard her gasp of surprise. She had not known the twins long enough to realize that they often talked like that. Jon and Mr. Morton thanked her again and they stood on the curb until she had closed the door.

"David and Penny have gone the other way to search for you," Mr. Morton said as they turned up the hill again. "You look as if you'd had a rough time, Jon. Trouble was that the fog came down so quickly."

Jon told his story without mentioning the sallow man, who didn't seem to matter so much now. As soon as he was indoors Mrs. Morton prescribed a hot bath and asked him to hurry because they were waiting supper for him. She didn't say much else except that Penny would be pleased to see him.

He was soaking in a bathful of steaming water when a crash on the door announced her arrival with David. They were both rude to him for dragging them out in the fog, but Jon grinned to himself when Penny shouted, "Serve you right for not coming to the pictures."

The afternoon's adventure seemed very far away when they all sat down to supper, but later when the twins were in bed and Mr. and Mrs. Morton were

in the little room they called the study, Penny, sitting on the hearthrug, said,

"What really happened to you, Jon? You haven't said much about it. I'm not interested in your beautiful Spurs, but I s'pose you realize that you were *hours* late and that everybody - specially Mr. and Mrs. Morton - was very worried."

"So was I," Jon admitted. "I was scared, too. I was haunted by a man who ran off somewhere down by Sparrow's shop when I asked him to help me..." and he told them the full story without trying to hide how he felt, and the curious way in which the little man, who reminded him vaguely of somebody else, had looked at him.

"Why should he run off like that?" he finished. "I'd done nothing to upset him except to agree with a rude remark about the smell of his stinking little cigar. He knew I was lost. Why should he want to keep out of my way?"

"Just didn't like the look of you," David said. "Can't say that I blame him. You must have upset his afternoon."

"What about my afternoon?" Jon protested. "What do you think, Penny? I can't help feeling even now that there was something very peculiar about it all... Like a sort of nightmare."

"You'll have to think jolly hard about that man, Jon. I think it's peculiar, too, and I'll tell you why. You may not remember him but he remembered you and didn't want you to recognize him."

2. The Old Papers

Mr. Albert Sparrow's junk shop was, as we know, at the corner of two roads. It was the sort of shop where, on a fine day, all sorts of tempting odds and ends were stacked outside on the pavement. There was a shop door with a bell on a spring that clanged alarmingly when it was opened, and another door at the side which led into a dark little hall and a steep flight of stairs leading up to Mr. Sparrow's comfortably-furnished flat.

It wasn't really fair to describe his shop as a junk shop because, although he did sell some rubbish, he knew a lot about antique furniture, china and glass, and had something good to show anybody who was interested in nice things.

Harriet enjoyed fussing over her grandfather and was devoted to him, but she did often wish that she could get to know more boys and girls of her own age. That was why she had been so thrilled when Jon knocked at the side door on Saturday evening and within ten minutes had introduced her to a nice man and to twins who in the hazy light of the hall had looked exactly alike.

The fog persisted all Sunday and she did not go out. On Monday she slept late, and did not wake until her grandfather came in, switched on the light and sat on the end of her bed. Sometimes she thought he looked very like their name - a perky little sparrow. His thinning white hair was in a sort of cock's-comb on the top of his head and his blue eyes twinkled at her kindly as he put a tray with two cups of tea on the chair beside her bed.

"It's nearly eight and the fog has cleared and I've got the porridge on... Hurry and get dressed because I'm going out this morning and I want you to look after the shop. I'm leaving you in charge."

She gulped her tea which was hot enough to bring tears to her eyes.

"But you can't do that, Grandpa. I wouldn't be any good. I don't know the price of things yet and somebody would be sure to try and sell me

something... Or," she added as an afterthought, "they might want to buy something which I wouldn't want to sell. That super musical box, f'rinstance."

"Ah, my dear. That *is* a beauty, I admit. I should hate to see it go but you can sell it for £100... I'm going to Hampstead to see some pictures. There's going to be good business in pictures, Harry. I feel it in my bones... Hurry along and don't forget your teeth."

When she came down ten minutes later, her grandfather was dressed in what he called his "going out business suit." It was a brown suit with a gold watch-chain stretched across the waistcoat. He also wore a stiff white collar, a purple tie, and brown shoes. In bad weather he wore over his shoes a pair of fawn spats, and it was only a few days ago that Harriet had plucked up enough courage to ask him what those curious things were called. On special occasions, such as a cinema in the West End, he carried a cane with a gold knob and sometimes, when examining jewellery or a picture or a piece of china, he fixed an eye-glass into one eye.

"Are you going to be out for a long time, Grandpa? Of course I don't really mind looking after the shop, but those new friends I made on Saturday night may be coming round to see me soon and they might ask me to go back to Brownlow Square with them."

"I don't know how long I'll be, but new friends or not you mustn't close the shop. You can sit in the office and you're not to buy anything. Only sell, and the prices are all marked. If anybody has something to sell just ask them to come back this afternoon and see me."

Half an hour later he left her in what he called the office. This was a fascinating little room with a window looking into the shop. The top of the door was glass, too, and from his desk Mr. Sparrow could see, without getting up, everyone who looked in the window or came into the shop. The office was packed with Mr. Sparrow's most valuable treasures, including the musical box and a model bird in a cage which sang when you put a penny in the slot. A narrow staircase at the back of the office led up to the flat.

Harriet helped him on with his coat, gave him his brown hat with a curly brim and his yellow gloves, and went to the door with him.

It was dull outside, but a cold wind from the north had blown the fog away.

"Don't keep too many lights on in the shop until someone comes in," he said. "Keep on the electric fire in the office and if you take any money put it in the box in the desk... And if your friends come you can go and see them this afternoon... Goodbye."

Harriet went back into the office and played "Bluebells of Scotland" twice. Then she went into the shop and looked through the piles of second-hand books. She liked books, especially adventure stories, but everything looked dull except a big, heavy volume of the *Boy's Own Paper* dated 1912. She took this into the office and was fascinated by the illustrations of schoolboys of nearly fifty years ago. Then she began to read a story of a fearless explorer in Africa and was absorbed in this when the bell on the shop door clanged. She looked up and saw two children in duffle coats staggering into the shop carrying a big brown paper bundle tied with thick string. With a squeak of excitement, she recognized the Morton twins, flung open the door of the office and dashed into the shop.

"Hullo," she gasped excitedly. "Hullo, both of you. I couldn't see you properly in the fog, but I can see now that you're terrific. I mean you really *are* exactly alike except that I can see that you're the girl, if you see what I mean."

The twins dropped their bundle and looked at Harriet pityingly. Grown-ups often made stupid and obvious remarks about them, but this girl was being silly.

"Hullo," Mary said after a long pause. "Of course we look alike. We can't help it. You haven't spoken to our dog yet. His name is Macbeth and Daddy called him that because when very young he murdered sleep. Speak to her nicely, Mackie."

Harriet looked at them again and giggled. Except for a glimpse of curly hair under the hood of Mary's duffle coat they did look exactly alike and she had

never seen twins like this before. Then she stooped to pat the shaggy-haired Scottie who was looking up at her with his head on one side.

"Hullo, Macbeth," she said. "I like you very much. You're very handsome," and he gently wagged his tail as Mary smiled. "It was jolly nice of you to come and see me," Harriet went on. "I was hoping some of you would come. I'm on my own this morning because my grandfather has gone to see some old pictures. I can show you all sorts of exciting things, but I'm afraid I can't come to see you in Brownlow Square until this afternoon... How's Jonathan?"

The twins looked at each other and smirked a little. Dickie broke a long silence.

"Acksherley," he began - and Harriet was not to know that this form of speech was usually introduced when the twins were about to show off - "Acksherley we haven't enquired about Jonathan's health this morning. We have been busy and we have been minding our own business after we had our father's permission to-----"

"Mind our own business," Mary continued in exactly the same tone of voice as her brother. "Acksherley, Harriet, although we are very pleased to see you, we have come on special, private business... It's, it's a matter of financial-----"

"Financial what?" Dickie said as he sat down on the big parcel. "Don't be silly, twin."

Mary sat down beside him.

"I'm not silly. I'm trying to be important about this financial business. You understand, don't you, Harriet?"

"I want to understand, Mary, and I'm sure that I shall when you tell me. If it's business though, shall we go into the office? My grandfather does business in there and it's my favourite room. There's a musical box in it that costs a hundred pounds."

"No!" Mary said.

"Yes. That's true. My grandfather just said that I could sell it for one hundred pounds."

"Gosh!" said Dickie, and then used a word which he had recently and proudly added to his vocabulary. "That's fantastic... Jus' fantastic... Show us."

Harriet led the way into the office and the twins looked round approvingly.

"Now show us the musical box and please allow Mackie to see, too."

Harriet pressed the lever that released the mechanism in the old box and "Bluebells of Scotland" obliged once again with its tinkly tune.

The twins were impressed.

"Again," Mary said, like a baby, and "Fantastic," her twin added.

At the end of the second performance Macbeth yawned a yawn that ended in a sort of "Wooooow."

"This is a very good shop," Dickie said. "We like it very much, Harriet, and we'd like you to show us everything after we've discussed our financial-----"

"Financial what?" Mary said almost automatically.

"It's like this," Dickie went on, ignoring the interruption. "We haven't lived in our house very long and because of Christmas and all that we have been very, very busy. At the top of our house there are three attics and we keep things like trunks and our father's R.A.F. cap in a cardboard box up there."

"Buck up," Mary said as she fingered some ivory chessmen. "We don't want to sell Daddy's hat, do we? Buck up, Dickie, or I'll tell it."

"*In one of these attics*", Dickie said loudly and distinctly, "we have found some very old books and papers with most peculiar pictures. We have asked

our father if we can sell all these books and papers if we like and keep the money, because it is only old shops like this that buy old and valuable rare old things like these old books and papers."

He paused for breath and Mary looked at him pityingly. He wasn't at his best this morning.

"Better come and look inside our bundle," she suggested, before Dickie could make another speech. "These things are very rare and we know your grandfather would like to buy them from us."

"Our father did this up for us," Mary explained. "I s'pose Dickie hasn't brought his knife. Isn't he silly?"

Harriet rushed for scissors from her grandfather's desk and when the cord was cut a pile of books and papers spilled over the floor. Macbeth, with a playful growl, seized a red-covered book, trotted with it behind a china cabinet and tore it to pieces with a loud rending sound.

"He's only playing," Mary explained. "He doesn't mean to be rude... Now don't you think that your nice grandfather would like to buy these very, very rare books and papers, Harriet?"

"He might, Mary, but I'm not allowed to buy anything. I'd love to buy them all from you... I think you ought to get your dog out of that corner 'cos he might knock something over."

"Jus' look at this, Harriet," said Dickie the salesman. "Wonderful old rare magazines here called *Illustrated London News*. They've got very rare pictures in of men in peculiar coats and top hats. And look at the date on them, Harriet. It's 1870! Why, that's just fantastic!"

"He does buy books sometimes and he might even buy those papers, too... Come in the office again and wait a little while. I'm all alone and I can show you lots of exciting things. Did you see the bird that sings if you put a penny in?"

So they went back into the inner room and Macbeth jumped on to Mr. Sparrow's chair and went to sleep. The twins were soon engrossed because Mr. Sparrow had many treasures that Harriet enjoyed showing to her new friends. She ran upstairs for two pennies of her own to show them how the bird sang, and then found an old box of children's games. Inside the lid was a board for a race game played with little lead horses ridden by jockeys in different coloured shirts, and two dice.

"You can play it if you like," Harriet suggested. "I'd better not start in case somebody comes into the shop, but you could have two horses each. You can play on this table if we clear it."

So the twins started on a furious and noisy game of horse-racing and did not even look up when the door-bell clanged and Harriet, feeling very nervous, hurried into the shop. A slim man in a light-coloured belted coat and a soft hat with the brim turned down was looking at some of Dickie's old papers.

"Good morning, sir," Harriet said politely, hoping that the stranger would not hear the beating of her heart, and then remembered to switch on all the lights.

The man looked up and nodded.

"I want Mr. Sparrow, please. Something I'd like to discuss with him and I want to buy these old papers."

He had a soft, expressionless voice and dark eyes which flickered over Harriet without much interest.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said. "My grandfather will be back soon. I cannot sell you any of those old books because they don't belong to the shop. We haven't bought them yet and I'm not allowed to buy things."

The man looked annoyed.

"I don't want the books. Just these old, rubbishy papers. They're no use to anybody so I'll take a few and come back to see old Sparrow later. I'll pay him for them when I see him."

But Harriet refused to give way. She was sure it would be wrong to sell something which had not yet been bought and she certainly wasn't going to allow this man to take even one of Dickie's papers. And she told him so again as firmly as she could.

The man looked at her with grudging admiration and then said, "Where did you get these papers if you haven't bought them yet?"

There seemed no reason why she shouldn't tell him, "Some friends of mine brought them in. They live near here at 7, Brownlow Square, and they told me that they've got lots more old books and papers that they want to sell. Why don't you call there this afternoon? I'll tell them that you're coming."

The man showed his teeth in what Harriet supposed was a smile and wrote down the address on the back of an envelope which he took from his pocket.

"Thank you, miss. I'd do that and I'll call and see Mr. Sparrow this afternoon, too, I've heard of something which I think he'll want to buy, and as I want some of those old papers, we shall be able to do some nice business together. That will be very nice, and if you tell him very carefully what I say, perhaps there'll be a little business in it for you, miss."

Harriet didn't like this. She wished he would go.

"I'll tell my grandfather," she said. "What name shall I say?"

"He won't remember my name but he'll remember me when he sees me. Good-bye, my dear..."

The bell clanged as he went out and Harriet watched him for a minute or two before she went back into the office.

The twins were still engrossed with their race game and Macbeth did no more than cock an ear when she slammed the door in her excitement and stood with her back against it.

"Listen, you two. I've had a customer who wants to buy old papers," and she told them the whole story.

"Just a minute. Just a sec," Dickie said when she had finished. "I think that's jolly good, Harriet, and we can do a lot of business when red has won this race. I'm red and it's a beastly thing to say about a twin but Mary has been cheating just a little. She pushed the dice over when it came five and that would have meant that she'd have landed in the ditch and had to start again with her yellow."

Mary looked at Harriet, grinned and upset the board.

"Silly little boy," she said to Dickie. "It's only an old game... If that man really does come home to buy old papers this afternoon we must be sure we've got everything ready for him. We might find some other old things to sell him - some of David's things, 'frinstance. We might make a lot of money, Dickie."

Dickie, who seemed not to have taken any offence at his sister's destructive tactics with the race-game, picked up the four horses and the dice and put them back in the box.

"That was a good idea of yours, Harriet, telling him to come to us. It was terrific... Did you know that we came to ask you to have dinner with us. Our mother says she will be delighted to see you, and Jon says that you saved his life... What was the man who wanted old papers like?"

"You mean dinner today? Soon? But that's marvellous if Grandpa doesn't mind. He said he'd bring something in for us, but if it's two chops like it generally is he could have mine for his supper... What was the man like?... Don't know really. Small. Pale face. Coat with a belt... Soft, oily sort of voice... a quiet voice. I didn't like him, but he liked your papers. Will you wait with me here until my grandfather comes back and then we can ask him? There's lots more things I can show you."

By the time the papers had been moved and the twins had started on their tour of inspection, Mr. Sparrow arrived. The shop bell clanged just as Dickie was trying to focus an enormous brass-bound telescope through the

glass door of the office to the clock at the back of the office without realizing that Mary had her hand over the other end.

Harriet went rather pink at the thought that her grandfather might be angry, but when she went across to him she saw that he was staring at the twins in astonishment.

"Bless my soul, child," he said as he put down his cane, "What are these?"

Dickie handed the telescope to Harriet and the twins turned to Mr. Sparrow at the same time and smiled at him radiantly. They did this sort of thing very well. They had had plenty of practice.

"You must be Harriet's grandfather," Dickie said as they advanced together to shake hands. "We came round specially to see you. I'm Richard Morton and this is my twin, Mary."

Mary shook hands, too, and said her piece.

"Acksherley we like grandfathers very, very much. They're very, very rare in our family... Please, may Harriet come and have dinner with us today? Our mother has asked us to ask you."

"Bless my soul," Mr. Sparrow whispered. "Who would have believed it? I must sit down," and he advanced towards the office.

"Now tell me what you've been up to. You don't look as if you've been sold anything and I'll be bound you've had the 'Bluebells of Scotland' and put some pennies in the bird-cage over there... And what's that pile of rubbish and old books?"

Dickie looked deeply shocked, but before he could say anything Harriet told the story.

"Good girl," he nodded when she had finished. "Let me look at those papers, young Richard... Nothing special about them. Just old copies. Give you five bob for the lot. Here you are."

Dickie blinked and took the money.

"Now tell me about this chap who's coming back to see me. Said he'd got something interesting to show me. eh? Did he say what it was. Didn't he give his name?"

"No. I asked him, Grandpa, but he said you'd remember him more easily than his name."

"Wonder if he's got any pictures to sell? Those I saw this morning weren't any good, but there's a lot of talk these days about pictures. Old prints of wild flowers are the craze. Last year it was birds, before that it was Cries of London. Those are the sort of pictures we want... Shan't be going out again today, so you go off with your young friends, Harry. And thank your mother kindly if you please, Richard and Mary."

"What about our dinner, Grandpa. Did you get chops?" Harriet asked.

"Bless my soul, so I did! They're in my coat pocket. Never mind. I'll have one for my dinner and yours for my supper... Run off with you now and enjoy yourselves... As for you, young man, you can sell this crazy chap as many old papers and books as you like but don't take less than five bob."

Harriet ran upstairs for her coat and beret, and five minutes later the three of them and Mackie were walking up the hill towards Brownlow Square.

Brownlow Square was a little forgotten corner of London. It wasn't really a square because two of the sides were longer than the other two. Three narrow streets ran up hill into it and people who saw it for the first time were always surprised by its shabby gentility and promise of peace and quiet. All the houses were tall and narrow, with steps leading down to a dark basement. Some of them had coloured front doors. No. 7 was scarlet - like a fire station, Dickie said - and some of the fronts were nicely painted in cream or grey. In the centre of the square was a patch of grass surrounded by a tired-looking hedge of laurel and an iron fence.

Brownlow Square was a surprise and a challenge to the dull streets surrounding it. The Mortons knew that it was not smart or fashionable, but it was quiet and not very far from the centre of London and quite near shops and a Tube station. Although there were a lot of stairs in the house, there

were also plenty of rooms; and as the Mortons enjoyed entertaining their friends their new home gave them the opportunity of doing so.

Harriet felt suddenly shy as the twins opened the red front door and shouted, "We're back again and we've got Harriet. Where is everybody?"

There was the sound of a piano, but before Harriet could decide whether it was from the radio or somebody playing in the house, a door at the end of the hall opened and a pleasant looking woman in an apron came forward to meet them. Harriet saw at once, by her likeness to the twins, that she was their mother and her shyness disappeared as Mrs. Morton smiled and said, "You must be the Harriet we've been hearing such a lot about. You rescued our friend Jonathan on Saturday, didn't you? We all wanted to know you and I hope you can stay to dinner. As it's a cold day it's steak and kidney pudding and I hope you like it."

"Oh, I do, thank you. I love coming here and thank you for asking me."

"The others are in the sitting-room, Harriet... Ah! Here's Jon. He must have heard you."

Harriet looked round to see Jon smiling down at her.

"Hullo," he said. "Nice of you to come, Harriet. Meet Penny and David," and he led the way into the front room.

Harriet, feeling shy again, first noticed a girl in a bright green jumper and tweed skirt. She was slim and pretty, with a striking head of curly red hair and one of the quickest and most friendly smiles Harriet had ever seen. Her eyes were wide and grey and her nose tip-tilted and freckled.

"I'm Penny," she said. "It's not a thing to boast about, but I'm Jon's cousin. He says that you're wonderful and rescued him when he was quite demented running round and round in the fog."

"You should just see Harry's super shop," Dickie said as he took off his coat and dropped it on the floor behind the open door. "She's got a fantastic musical box that plays a fantastic tune."

"Never mind her shop," a boy over by the window said. "I'm David, the twins' brother. We've only been here four weeks but we're glad you live near us. If you've seen the twins you've seen the worst of us. Come in and get warm."

Mary took Harriet's coat and after an awkward silence Dickie said, "Of course Mary and me don't know what you're all going to do this afternoon, but Mary and me and Harriet have been doing some financial business this morning and we're going to do some more this afternoon right here in this house. Harriet has been in charge of her shop and she fixed this for us. There's a man wants to buy old books and papers and Dad said that we could have all those up in the attics."

"What sort of man," Penny asked. "Tell us, Harriet Has he got a sack on his back and does he push a barrow?"

Harriet tried to describe the stranger but didn't think she was being very successful when Jon interrupted her.

"You say he was wearing a light-coloured coat with a belt. Was he wearing a cap?"

"No, Jon. I'm sure he wasn't. A hat with the brim turned down all the way round. There wasn't anything special to remember about him except that he had a nasty, soft sort of voice."

"Had he got a moustache?"

"I don't think so... I can't really remember. It doesn't really matter, does it?... He looked pale."

"Let the girl alone, Jon," David laughed. "It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Might do. Tell me, Harriet. Do you remember if he was smoking a little black smelly cigar?"

"That's funny. He wasn't smoking when he came into the shop, I'm sure, but when he went out he stopped on the pavement and lit a little cigar like that."

I'm sure he did though I wouldn't have remembered if you hadn't asked me... Yes. I'm sure."

"That's peculiar, isn't it?" Jon said. "Pity the twins didn't see him, but he sounds like the chap who ran away from me in the fog last night before I knocked on your door, Harriet... See what I mean, don't you, David? Penny says that he ran off because he recognized me."

3. Enter James Wilson

It was little wonder that Harriet was bewildered by the Lone Piners. Why Penny should tell Jon that a man had run away from him because he had recognized him was beyond her.

She looked round in amazement and then Penny caught her eye and laughed.

"Come and sit here, Harriet. You look as if you think we are all mad, and I can't blame you. You'll get used to us."

Harriet blushed and came to the chair on the arm of which Penny was sitting.

David passed her a bag of toffees. "You mustn't mind us," he smiled. "We're all old friends and we've had some exciting adventures together - two of them in Rye where Jon and Penny live. This is the first time they've been to stay with us in London. Most holidays we try and go up to Shropshire where we've got an old house and we've got some more friends up there, too."

Harriet gulped and chewed on her toffee before she could answer.

"I think I'm lucky because Jon knocked on our door on Saturday night. I love coming to my grandfather's every holiday and this is the third time I've been to help him. He really is fun and sometimes we go to the West End to the cinema and the circus at Olympia, but I've never known anybody quite like you all. Grandfather's a bit old for me, you see."

"Of course we see," Penny said. "If he's as nice as you say he is, he won't mind you coming to see us often. Jon and I don't know anything about London and David was suggesting a bus ride this afternoon. I expect you know more about London than he does. Will you come?"

Harriet thought she detected a quick look of warning or understanding between Jon and David, but before either of them could speak, Dickie said

quickly, "You can't all go out on a bus this afternoon because we can't come with you. We've jolly well told you that we've got to stay in here and do some financial."

"You'll be sorry if you go with them, Harry," Mary warned. "I don't suppose they'll take any notice of you. As you know this man who is coming p'raps you'd rather stay with us."

Harriet wanted to go with the others, but before she could answer Mrs. Morton came into the room.

"What do you think of them all, Harriet?" she smiled. "But that's a silly question because it's difficult to answer. Dinner will be ready in five minutes, so you - especially the twins - can go and wash and Penny will show you our funny old house."

The twins grinned, did as they were told and went out together. Penny took Harriet's arm and followed them and when Harriet looked back she saw Mrs. Morton on her knees tickling Macbeth the Scottie, who was slowly wagging his tail. She was looking up at the two big boys in such a way that the tears stung Harriet's eyes.

"What's the matter?" Penny said when they were in the little room upstairs. "Can you tell me?"

"It's nothing really. I'm a fool. You're all so decent to me and I was just thinking that there's nothing more wonderful than having a brother or sister or friends like you all are together."

"Don't fuss then," Penny smiled. "Maybe I understand better than you know. I'm an 'only' too and my father and mother are thousands of miles away and I don't even see them once a year. Sometimes I almost forget what they look like. We're your friends now, but you mustn't take too much notice of the twins' nonsense. They're grand really, even though they do show off."

Harriet smiled at her gratefully and when the two girls came down the others were waiting for them.

Although Jon asked her again to come with them exploring on a bus, Harriet realized that her grandfather would expect her home long before tea. "But I'd like to come another day if you'll ask me. I've had a wonderful time."

"Stay with us and see if that man comes to buy the old papers," Mary suggested. "We haven't got as many exciting things here as you have in your shop, but we've got some fantastic attics."

So that was what happened. When they had all washed up for Mrs. Morton, the twins took Harriet off to help them sort out the rest of the old papers so that their customer could see what he was buying. They stood on the step and watched Penny, Jon and David set off on their expedition, little knowing what curious events would affect them all during the next few hours.

Penny was in particularly good spirits. She liked outings and she wasn't at all unhappy about being taken out by two boys. She thought she looked quite nice in her camel coat and green beret as she tried to keep up with David's longer stride. Jon, with his long legs, was already ten yards ahead.

"Don't bother about him, David," she gasped. "He always forgets that anyone else is with him. He's thinking about something scientific. No wonder he got lost on Saturday... I say, David. Did you think he was a bit peculiar about this man in the fog? He's worried about him, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. He hasn't said anything much to me about it but I've got an idea that he's more worried than he'll admit. We'll get it all out of him presently."

"Where are we going? Not the Tower of London, please, David. It's the wrong weather for the Tower or cathedrals. I don't want places too full of history today. Take us somewhere cheerful."

"I thought we'd go by bus from the *Saracen's Head* to Charing Cross and then catch another to Sloane Square and explore Chelsea. I wish we could afford to live there. King's Road has got all sorts of shops and, in a way, it's like the High Street of a country town. There are some beautiful squares off

the King's Road and many narrow streets with little houses with coloured doors like ours."

When they were on the top seats of the bus, David asked Jon again whether he was still worrying about the man he had seen in the fog on Saturday and who, he believed, was going to call at 7, Brownlow Square this afternoon.

"If you're so interested, why didn't you stay with the twins and Harriet and have another meeting with him?" he finished.

"The twins will tell me exactly what he looks like and so will Harriet. I asked them specially. I didn't stay because I wanted to come on this conducted tour, and because I don't want that chap to see me again until I've remembered who he is. I'm beginning to get some ideas but I'm not going to say any more about it yet. Not till I'm sure."

"Not till I wheedle you, Jonathan? Will you tell us if I wheedle?"

"Never, then," Jon said as he edged along the seat. "Stop fussing about it. Do you like young Harriet?"

"I do," Penny agreed. "She's nice and I think we shall all be good for her... I shan't bother to wheedle you, Jon. You're not worth it. I'm going to devote myself to David."

There is no better way of seeing London than from the top of a bus. There was no trace of yesterday's fog, but there was a nip of frost in the air as the short afternoon waned and the street lamps came up. Through the murky highways of north London their red bus brought them steadily south; along Euston Road past King's Cross, St. Pancras and Euston stations and then south again to Trafalgar Square where they changed. It was nearly dusk now and as they waited for a No. 11 bus David pointed out the noisy flocks of starlings wheeling above the tall buildings in Northumberland Avenue. Their new bus took them down Whitehall, past the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey and Victoria into Sloane Square and here, as David had suggested, they found a very different part of London. There were fruit and flower stalls along the King's Road, exciting little restaurants, lovely

shops and actually two bearded artists - or possibly as David said, "Two beards pretending to be artists."

On their way back from the river, when they were thinking that tea and toast in a cafe would be welcome, Penny stopped to look in the window of an antique shop. Unlike Mr. Sparrow's shop away in north London this was very smart, and the few pieces of furniture on view were not marked with a price. On a beautiful little rosewood table just inside the window were four glass paper-weights. Each was about the size and shape of an orange with a quarter cut away so that it would lie flat without rolling over. In the centre of each, set in some ingenious way by a Victorian craftsman, was a miniature bloom looking almost like a crystallized flower.

"Look at these!" Penny said excitedly as she pressed her nose to the glass. "David! I want one of those for your mother. Jon and I want to give her a present and I'm sure that one of these paper-weights is just what she'd like. It's not too horribly practical and I'm sure it's something she'd never buy for herself. Do you think she'd like one, David?"

"Of course she would, Penny, but you can't afford anything like that. They'll be too expensive. This is the sort of shop where everything is what Dickie would call fantastic... Let's get on and find a place for tea."

"We'll have time for tea after we've bought a paperweight. If we haven't got enough money with us maybe we can reserve it now. You agree, don't you, Jon? Of course you do. Come in and look at them, anyway, and you come too, David, and help us to choose."

The door opened quietly but it must have worked a signal which they did not hear, because a tall, well-groomed woman in tweeds appeared at the back of the shop, switched on a beautiful lamp and looked at them without much enthusiasm. Penny was not the sort of girl to be daunted by someone who looked superior and, hoping that she did not look too much like a schoolgirl, she smiled and said,

"Good afternoon. We are interested in glass paperweights. May we look at those, please?"

The woman inclined her head and raised a cigarette in a long jade holder to her lips.

"You may look, but please handle them with care. They are expensive."

"But this is wonderful!" Penny cried. "Look, David. It's got a rose inside and I know your mother would love it... How much is it, please?"

The woman put down her cigarette holder.

"Those are eighteen," she said coldly.

Penny turned excitedly to Jon. "But we could afford eighteen shillings, Jon. We can easily do that between us... Go away, David, while Jon and I go into a huddle over this."

At that moment the shop door opened and a good-looking young man in a soft hat, untidy tweed coat and college scarf came in and glanced enquiringly from the three friends to the woman at the back of the shop.

"Good afternoon, sir," the latter said. "Please come in and look round," and then to Penny, "I think you misunderstood me. The price of those paper-weights is eighteen pounds, not eighteen shillings... Now, sir. What may I show you?"

Penny blushed with humiliation and disappointment and gave David a grateful glance when he said, "Don't worry, Penny. I was sure they'd be too expensive. Let's find that tea and then go home. It's getting cold."

Before Penny could answer they heard the young man say, "I'm looking for old prints of wild flowers - particularly any by a man called William Johnson who was painting about 1870. I expect you've heard of them? There was an article about this chap and his work in one of the papers the other day."

"Of course we know about Johnson flower prints, sir. They are now in great demand and consequently very expensive. Is your enquiry serious? Forgive me asking this, but it so happens that I know where I can get one for you."

So that there shall be no misunderstanding I must tell you that the price will be about seventy-five guineas."

David gasped and nudged the others as the young man replied, "I want one for a very important present - wedding present, actually. The price doesn't worry me, so you may try and get me one and let me know when I can come and see it."

While the man was talking, Penny gave a start of surprise and whispered, "I'm sure I know him. You ought to know him too, Jon."

"Should I know him, Penny? He reminds me of somebody. Looks a decent sort of chap."

"Of course you know him too... I'm sure of it. I'm going to ask him if he remembers us."

The boys grabbed her, but she shook herself free as the man took a fountain pen from his pocket and said, "I'll give you my address and telephone number. The name is James Wilson."

"I was sure I knew you as soon as you came in, Mr. Wilson," Penny smiled. "Surely you remember us? I'm Penny Warrender and I met you in my aunt's hotel in Rye called the *Gay Dolphin*. And, of course, you remember my untidy cousin Jonathan? And David Morton who came to stay at the *Dolphin* too with those awful twins when we had that terrific adventure. Are you still-----?"

"Hush, child, hush!" Mr. Wilson interrupted. "You mustn't give me away like this... Shall I ever forget you, Penny, but please, please wait outside for me. I won't be a minute. Please wait," and he strode down the shop, opened the door, bowed to Penny, grinned at the boys and closed the door behind them.

"Well!" Penny said. "What do you think of that? If he thinks I'm going to wait for him after being treated like that he's made a great mistake! How dare he turn us out like that? It isn't his shop. I s'pose you've both remembered who he is now?"

It was dark outside but although she could not see his face properly Penny knew that Jon was excited as he looked through the window and watched the man talking animatedly to the superior woman.

"You're right, Penny. We do know him. He's the journalist who helped us in that smuggling adventure at Dungeness with the Ballinger (*The Elusive Grasshopper*). You remember him, don't you, David? I'm not surprised about Penny because she went soppy about him."

"Oh, you liar, Jon. I'll never forgive you for that... Here he comes. Shall we run?"

"Not on your life," Jon said. "Meeting him again has given me a big idea. Let's see what he's up to now."

Wilson came out, smiled at them, looked up at the name of the shop and murmured,

"Mervin Brown, 19, Boscombe Street... Just remember that, children. I wonder if that cold-blooded woman is Mrs. Brown. If she is I can understand why Mr. Brown takes himself off elsewhere... Come and have a cup of tea and a crumpet with me and explain yourselves."

"We can see that you haven't changed," Penny said, "but why did you turn us out of the shop as if we were a lot of silly kids?"

"Because you were just going to give me away by asking if I was still on the *Clarion*, weren't you? I knew you were. And then you would have said more about our last adventure in front of that harpy in there. I didn't want you to do that... Now come along. Hot crumpets swimming in butter for me," and he swept them along before any of them could protest even if they had wanted to do so.

Three minutes later they were in King's Road and in another three minutes were sitting round a table in a comfortable cafe with chintz curtains across the window. Wilson helped Penny off with her coat and pulled out a chair for her almost before Jon had recovered from his surprise.

When the boys came back to the table he encouraged them all to talk to him - and it wasn't until much later that they realized how clever he was at this. When they had finished a big plate of crumpets, Jon said, "Now tell us what exciting crimes you've been solving. Perhaps we can help you again? We're not a bad team and Penny and I will be with the Mortons at Brownlow Square for a week. Why didn't you want Mrs. Mervyn Brown to know you work on a paper?"

He looked at them quizzically.

"I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. I'm sure you'd help me to get a good story if you could, and I think I'm on to something big. You'll have to trust me if I can't tell you everything that I know about this at present, but I should be very grateful if you would let me know if, and where, you see any old-fashioned colour prints of wild flowers. I expect you heard me asking in that shop. I want to know all I can about Johnson's flower prints. They're valuable because they've become fashionable. There have been articles about them in papers and magazines. I believe there's a reason for this - why they are suddenly so popular, I mean - and I want the story behind the reason. If you pass a junk shop,' or an antique shop like Brown's, will you go in and ask if they have any Johnson's flower prints or if they can get them? If the answer is 'Yes' to either question, please ring me up at the paper or at home...

"Write down the numbers, will you? The paper is the *Evening Clarion* and the phone Fleet Street 9999... I've got two rooms in a mews off Gray's Inn Road called Rosemary Court and the number is Bloomsbury 1739... It's grand seeing you again - specially Penny, of course. Ring me up soon and let me know how you're getting on and I'll buy you some more crumpets. Now I must go... Remember me to those twins of yours but don't put them on to Johnson's flower prints yet... You will help me if you can, won't you?"

"You haven't told us enough," David protested. "Surely you can give us an idea of what's at the back of all this?"

"I will if we find out more. If I told you all that I suspected, you wouldn't find it so easy to go into a shop and ask innocently for a Johnson's flower

print. Don't be scared at the price, but say your parents are interested... I'm sure they would be anyway. You'd be telling the truth."

He got up and paid the bill and they walked with him to their bus stop. Here he shook hands with them, signalled a taxi, waved once and was gone.

Penny sighed. "There's another wonderful man whirled away out of my life. Whether you boys like it or not we're going to search for flower prints. I'm sure he's on to something exciting and it will be fun helping him. You do agree, don't you? Jon has got a private mystery of his own on just now, so you and I can go hunting together, David. What do you think?"

"Here comes our bus," David announced, and when they had found seats on the top deck Jon said,

"Let's help Wilson if we get a chance, but there's surely no need to spend the rest of the holiday going into junk shops? I'm sorry about my private mystery, but it's just that I've got an idea which is so fantastic, as Dickie says, that I must be more certain before I tell you... Let's start on the Wilson trail by asking Harriet's grand-father about Johnson flower prints, It's on our way home, isn't it?"

"Could be," David admitted. "Good idea. Let's see what he knows about them. None of us have met him, have we?"

Mr. Sparrow, no longer in his smart, brown going-out business suit but in a tweed jacket and patterned pullover, came out of his office when his shop door clanged a warning.

Penny explained who they were and Jon thanked him for allowing Harriet to go out with him in the fog on Saturday.

"I hope she got back here safely this afternoon," David said. "We enjoyed having her to dinner and hope she'll come again."

"I hope you'll ask her, boy," Mr. Sparrow smiled. "She's upstairs now if you want her. She's a good girl and I like her company, but it's not right for an old man like me to keep her here all the time. I was telling her at tea-time

that we'd like you all, with those rascally twins, to come down to the West End with us one night for a little entertainment. That would give us great pleasure."

They thanked him and Penny said, "We're on our way home now, thank you, but please tell Harriet that some of us will be down in the morning. We wanted to ask you whether you know anything about Johnson's flower prints or whether you've seen any?"

Mr. Sparrow looked surprised.

"Of course I know about them, girl. Why do you ask? They're worth a lot of money."

"A friend was telling us about them. He wants one badly and we told him that we'd look out for one. Would one be too expensive for me to take home to Jon's mother?"

"Depends how much money you've got. Have you got a hundred pounds to spend?... I thought not. Funny you youngsters should mention this. A chap came in not long ago with a yarn that he knew where to get one of these prints. If your pal is serious, tell him that I can get him one."

Jon thanked him again and they went out.

"Sounds as if Wilson is on to something, doesn't it?" David said as they walked up the hill. "We'd better tell him what old Sparrow said. We'll try and find out more from him tomorrow."

It was dark when they reached Brownlow Square, which was badly lit.

"You can always remember where our house is," David said. "The second lamp on the right is directly outside Number 7," and at that moment they saw a small man come down the steps from the front door, open the gate and step on to the pavement. In the light from the lamp they could see that he was wearing a cap, a belted coat and carrying a bundle under his arm. He turned and walked towards them.

"Here comes the twins' customer," Penny said as Jon ran forward to meet him.

David and Penny watched them meet and then saw the man turn and race off in the opposite direction. They hurried up to Jon who was running back towards them.

"Did you see that?" he said. "That's my mystery man of Saturday. Better not tell the others yet, but I know now who he is. Penny was right when she said that he must have recognized me first. *That is our old enemy Slinky Grandon*, but I didn't know him because he's shaved off his moustache and side whiskers and he looks badly down on his luck... I bet he's up to no good if he doesn't want me to know him. This looks like another adventure for us."

4. Holloway Hill

"Slinky Grandon?" Penny gasped. "No wonder he didn't want you to recognize him. Quick! Follow him."

The two boys raced round the square and down the street which led to a main road and a bus route.

"Don't wait for me," Penny yelled as they easily outstripped her. "I'll follow if I can."

Jon, with his long legs, was soon in the lead. The road curved round sharply and was badly lit, so he was not altogether surprised that Slinky, as they had always called their old enemy, was already out of sight. If they were to trail him successfully, it was vital to see whether he turned right or left when he reached the main road; so Jon spurted for the corner. Suddenly he was attacked by a vicious pain in his side and had to slow down.

"Stitch," he gasped as David caught him up. "Run for the corner and see which way he goes. I'll catch you up."

David raced ahead in the middle of the road. There was a lamp at the corner and here he slowed down for a second and turned and waved as if to show that he could still see the fugitive. Jon fought for breath and bent double to ease the pain. When he reached the corner there was no sign of Slinky and he caught David at a bombed site on the corner of the main road.

"Look!" David gasped as he pointed over the wall. "He's chucked his bundle away, but I don't know which way he went then. It's too dark to see properly. What shall we do?"

Jon looked back. There was no sign of Penny and he wondered what had happened to her. While he hesitated, David took charge.

"Never mind about Penny. You go right and I'll go left. Look for him at the bus stop and follow him whatever happens. If we miss him, come back here and we'll rescue the papers. Good luck!" and he was off.

Jon crossed the road and turned right into the busy street. Then, fifty or sixty yards ahead, in the light of a shop window, he thought he saw Slinky boarding a bus. Jon spurred again but the bus moved off before he reached it.

Jon was now feeling better. His stitch had gone and he was determined not to be fooled by Grandon again. The ideal way of following the bus on which the fugitive was travelling was on a bicycle which he hadn't got, so he did the next best thing and jumped on to the next bus just as it was moving off. He climbed to the top deck hoping that there would be vacant window seats. He was lucky, because the front left-hand window seat was empty and from this he got a good view of both road and pavement. The 607 bus which he wanted to watch was fifty yards ahead but not going particularly fast. Jon began to pray for traffic lights at red which would stop both buses at the same time. His bus accelerated past an erratic cyclist and began to catch up.

Then, perhaps a hundred yards ahead, he saw the green of traffic lights. They were now close behind the 607, which was obviously accelerating to cross before the lights changed. His prayer must have been heard for the lights changed to amber and his bus stopped level with the 607. It was easy to see the passengers on the top deck. Slinky was exactly opposite to him and only about three feet away.

The lights changed and the line of traffic moved forward just as Jon had made up his mind to board the other bus and watch the stairs. At that moment Slinky looked up and saw Jon staring at him. It seemed absurd but a look of almost superstitious fear flashed into his eyes. There was not the slightest doubt that he knew Jon instantly, and it seemed that Penny's guess had been right when she suggested that he was afraid to be recognized. Jon, considering quickly what was the best thing to do, continued to stare at him as threateningly as he could. Then the other bus drew away and Jon made a quick decision. He jumped from his seat, ran for the stairs and met the conductor who looked at him suspiciously.

Jon pushed sixpence into the man's hand and clattered down to the platform. His bus was moving fast now so he clutched the rail and leaned out in the

hope of seeing the other bus. Then another passenger rang the bell for a request stop a hundred yards ahead and pulled Jon back.

"Don't be a fool, boy. You might be thrown out."

As soon as the passenger had got off, Jon leaned forward again and saw the other bus well ahead. The pavement was crowded and it was impossible to tell whether Slinky was already mingling with the crowds or had decided to stay where he was. Then Jon's conductor came downstairs and told him to find a seat.

"I made a mistake about the stop I wanted," Jon explained. "I expect I'll get off at the next one."

"Not sure what you want to do, are you, mate? Like a cat on hot bricks, and here's your twopence change which you don't deserve anyway. Here's the next stop so buck up and make up your mind."

Jon thanked him and looked out as the bus slowed down. This time he was lucky. The other bus was moving off, but Jon recognized Slinky pushing through the queue waiting at the bus stop. He jumped off; this was his big chance to find out more about Grandon, and he was determined to keep his quarry in sight.

Jon, with no idea where they were except that they were heading south, kept in the shadows as much as he could and had no difficulty in keeping Slinky in sight from about thirty yards distance. The man looked back once and Jon, just in time, dodged behind a fat woman who was gazing longingly into the window of a sweet shop. Then Jon hurried a little and closed the gap between them, and soon found himself only about ten yards away from Slinky, with nobody between them. Suddenly Grandon stopped to light one of his little black cigars. Jon stopped too and at that moment the man flung an empty match-box in the gutter and turned as if to look for a bus. He recognized Jon instantly and, almost before the latter realized what was happening, was racing down the street. Jon followed, certain that he could soon overtake him, but he was surprised when his quarry, after a quick glance over his shoulder, dashed across the road in front of an advancing line of traffic. Jon swerved to follow him but the shriek of brakes warned

him of his danger. He stepped back and to his fury lost sight of Grandon behind a bus.

The traffic passed, and Jon, almost despairing now of the chase, ran across the street without any idea of which way to turn. He looked in each direction, and then about fifty yards away in the direction in which they had been running he saw a group of people on the pavement. He thought this worth investigation and, feeling very tired, trotted towards them. By the time he reached the group it had grown considerably, but being tall himself he could see a very large and angry man in the centre holding Slinky Grandon by the collar of his belted coat.

"Not so fast, my little feller," the big man said. "Just pipe down. You've got to learn to look where you're going, mate, and next time you knocks down a lady and her shopping basket just you wait and pick everything up for her... *You've said you're sorry, 'ave you?...* That's just fine... *And you helped her pick up some oranges, did you?...* What else do you expect to do? Kick 'em in the gutter?" and then Grandon, jerked round by the grip on his coat collar, saw Jon standing at the back of the crowd.

But Jon, having found their enemy again, was not sure of the best thing to do. The purpose of the chase had been to discover where Grandon was living or to find out why he wanted old papers. The latter he had jettisoned, suggesting that escape was more important, but even if he got away now, knowing Jon was within a few yards of him, it was probable that he would lead him off on a wild goose chase somewhere miles away from his real objective. Jon was still undecided when the woman who had been knocked down said, "Let him go, mate. He's not worth bothering about." There was a laugh at this, and almost before anybody realized what was happening Grandon was dodging through the crowd again like a rabbit.

Jon sighed and went after him.

Grandon did not look back, but Jon was sure that he knew he was still being followed. The chase seemed to be rather futile now and nothing much happened until the man suddenly spurted again. The pavements were no longer crowded and Jon was now so weary that he found it difficult not to fall much further behind. Suddenly Grandon turned into the entrance of an

Underground station. Jon tried to catch him but it was a poor effort, and he knew that his only chance was that there might be a queue for tickets and that Grandon would not be allowed in the lift or on the escalator without one.

It was a small station with only one lift. There was no booking office and this meant that the man who worked the lift also sold tickets. Jon was just in time to hear the doors close. There was nobody else in sight so Grandon must now be safe in the descending lift. Jon leaned against the wall and mopped his forehead. He'd had enough excitement and physical exercise for one day and there was no doubt now that Grandon had, after all, succeeded in fooling him. Then he looked up and saw, in the far corner of the entrance hall, a notice which said STAIRS TO TRAINS.

Without hesitation he grasped the cold, iron handrail and began to run down the spiral staircase. Although he kept to the right where each stair was wider he was soon giddy and out of breath. The vertical shaft in which the stairway was built was very cold and only dimly lit, and as he paused for a rest he suddenly realized that he was alone. He looked up and then down but could see nothing but the winding stair.

If he was to reach the platform before the train came in he would have to hurry so he tried taking every other step and looked ahead, rather than down, hoping not to feel so giddy. Down he went. Every other step. Down in the cold yellow light of the naked electric bulbs. Then each step as a change, but this seemed too slow. Down. Down. Always curving round to the left. His head began to swim again and he stopped for a moment's rest. Then he heard the distant rumble of a train and knew that he could not be far from the platform. He started down again three steps at a time and after four more turns found himself in a tiled passage. A rush of air heralded the arrival of a train. He raced towards the platforms and was just in time to see the red light on the rear coach disappearing into the tunnel.'

So Slinky had beaten him after all! Disconsolately, Jon walked on to the other platform but there were only two girls waiting there. He went back to the lift, paid the man for a ticket to the next station, after trying to explain that he ran down the stairs to catch a friend on the platform, and went up to street level much more quickly than he had come down.

He walked slowly up the long hill to Brownlow Square and thankfully rang the bell of No. 7. There was a lot of noise behind the front door which was opened at once by David who still had his coat on. Behind him came the twins, both talking indignantly at the same time.

"Oh, hullo," David said. "I've only just got in and made a fine fool of myself. How did you get on?"

"Not very well. He fooled me in the end but I kept him on the run. Did you bring back the bundle of papers?"

David nodded. "I fetched it out. The twins have dragged it off somewhere... *Do shut up, twins. We can't hear ourselves speak...* Come in and sit down, Jon, and swap yarns."

The twins followed them into the sitting-room. Their complaint was the usual one of being left out of everything, but at last they calmed down and listened to Jon and David's story. David's was simple enough. He had followed a slim man in a light coat and cap, boarded the same bus, but been forced to take the only vacant seat at the back on the top deck while the stranger had sat in the front seat reading a paper. He never turned round until the bus reached the suburban terminus and then David saw that it wasn't Slinky.

"I felt a fine fool," David admitted ruefully as he got up and stretched. "Let's have something to eat. Mother and Father have gone out to the pictures and I suppose Penny has gone with them. That's what you said, wasn't it, twins?"

"No we did *not*" Dickie said. "You want to be careful what you say, David. We're always being told that we've got to be careful. Mummy and Daddy have gone to the pictures, but Penny has gone out."

"*Out?*" Jon said peevishly. "Where out? And why?"

The twins smirked at each other.

"Acksherley," Mary said, "we have important and urgent news for you in a dispatch. If you two weren't so jolly mean and selfish talkin' all the time about yourselves you could hear something to your advantage about Penny-----"

Jon flushed with anger and got up.

"Do stop fooling, twins. If you've got a note from Penny hand it over and stop talking about it."

Dickie opened his mouth to protest at this rough talk and then thought better of it. Mary looked at David who nodded and then fished about inside her jersey and produced a crumpled envelope and passed it to him. It was addressed "Jon and David."

"Penny went down to see Mr. Sparrow," Mary explained. "Harriet brought the vital dispatch but she couldn't stay because she'd promised to spend the evening with her grandfather. Read it out, David."

"She's written this at Mr. Sparrow's shop," David began and then read on:

"Don't you boys worry too much about deserting me because I'm on the trail wherever you've gone. After you'd dashed off down the hill I had an idea that if lots of people seem to want Johnson's flower pictures, Slinky is exactly the sort of man who might want some too. I thought Mr. Sparrow would know something about them and he does. Harriet described Slinky to him and Mr. Sparrow seemed to be fairly sure that a man like Slinky asked him about these flower pictures and said that if anybody enquired for them he might be able to get one. Mr. Sparrow isn't sure but he thinks the man also asked to be told if he had one for sale. Anyway he left his name, which isn't Grandon now but Phillips, and the address which is 79, Holloway Hill, which Mr. Sparrow says isn't so very far away and I'm going off there on my own to spy out the land. I'll have news for you by the time we meet. What's the use of dashing madly after buses?"

"Be good boys. Love,

"Penny."

"She's mad," Jon said as David finished. "Raving, in fact. Going off like that by herself to a place she's never heard of and where she believes Slinky is living. Slinky will remember that red head of hers... Sorry, David, but we'd better go and look for her."

David nodded and put the letter in his pocket.

"We're coming too," Dickie said quickly. "We're coming and so is Mackie because he's a good trailer. We'd better call at Mr. Sparrow's first just to see if she's gone back there."

"Good idea," Jon agreed. "Maybe we'd better leave a note here for Mr. and Mrs. Morton if they get back first... And for Penny too in case we miss her. May we leave the front door on the latch for her, David? She won't have a key and she might get here first. What do you think?"

"Good idea. You write to Penny and I'll deal with the parents. I don't think they'll be very keen on the idea of the open door, but we'll risk it."

They called at Mr. Sparrow's and Harriet answered the door. Penny had not come back, she said, and added that she was heartbroken because she could not come with them but begged that they should let her know tomorrow what had happened.

"We asked Grandpa where Holloway Hill is but he wasn't sure," she went on. "He thinks it's near Finsbury Park and only about twenty minutes' walk. Penny said she was going to find a nice policeman and ask him."

"I'm sure she did," Jon said fervently. "She'd never think of asking a nasty one... Thank you, Harry. We'll see you tomorrow."

They were lucky for they found a policeman trying the doors of some of the closed shops in the same street. He looked at them shrewdly before answering their question.

"Holloway Hill? Now what would you youngsters be wanting up there tonight?"

"We're going to meet my cousin," Jon explained. "She had to go up there."

"Did she *have* to go, son? Holloway Hill is not much of a place at the best of times and not very cheerful at night... Maybe you'd better go and meet your cousin as soon as you can... Here's the best way..."

He gave them straightforward directions, which Jon repeated, and then wished them "Goodnight" and added, "Don't hang about up there too long."

Holloway Hill was a slum running up from the main road. At the far end some of the little houses and shops had been cleared to make way for new blocks of flats, but there was still something very unsavoury about it. They were all silent as they looked up at the name on the wall and then stared hopefully up the dimly lit street for a sign of Penny. But the road was empty except for a skinny cat foraging among some smelly fish and chip papers in the gutter. Macbeth strained at his lead and made eager whimpering sounds, and the cat glared at him balefully.

"Nice place, chaps," David said. "Let's get it over and find 79. There are two shops lit up at the top of the street. We could ask there."

Number 79 was a grubby little newspaper and tobacco shop. The window was crowded with novelettes, dusty show cards advertising cigarettes, and a few pipes and lighters. The glass upper half of the door was covered with some nasty looking comics and it seemed odd that the window should be lit so late in the evening.

Even the twins were silent as they stood on the pavement looking with disgust at this end to their journey.

"Penny must have made a mistake," David suggested. "Surely Grandon can't be living here? If he is he's sunk pretty low."

"He is low," Dickie said brightly. "That's just what he is... All the same, he gave us ten shillings for those old papers and then threw them away... Everybody is going mad round here... What's that place opposite?"

"It's what some people call a café," Mary said. "I can't think why anybody would want to come to Holloway Hill to eat, but you can see three or four little tables through the window. What are we going to do now?"

"I'm going into the shop to ask if a Mr. Phillips lives here," Jon said. "I don't think he could possibly have got back yet but I'll try and find out. I'm going to ask about Penny too. Stay here with the twins, David."

David nodded as Jon opened the door and went into the shop. His first impression was a strong smell of frying bacon which reminded him that he was hungry, and his second that this was one of the dirtiest shops he had ever seen. There was nobody behind the counter, but there was a light in another room which he could see through a glass panelled door at the back of the shop.

Feeling very unhappy and nervous he coughed. A shadow filled the doorway and an enormous man squeezed through into the shop. He was not only fat but bald and clean shaven. His face was like a pale, round cheese and his eyes small like a pig's.

He stared at Jon without moving a muscle of his face. Then, "Wot d'yer want?" he said suddenly in a squeaky voice.

Jon gulped.

"I've called to see if a Mr. Phillips lives here, please. He left this address with a Mr. Sparrow who keeps an antique shop. I'm a friend of Mr. Sparrow's and I've got a message-----"

"You made a mistake, son. I live here and my name's not Phillips."

"But this is 79, Holloway Hill, isn't it?"

"S'right. Nobody name of Phillips lives here. This shop's closed now. Should have locked the door. Better be on your way, son... Stranger rahnd 'ere, aren't yer?... Good night."

Jon stood his ground although his heart was thumping uncomfortably.

"Has anyone else been here tonight asking for Mr. Phillips? My cousin. A red-headed girl. Mr. Sparrow gave her the address too and I've come to meet her."

"Now look 'ere, son. My supper is on and the shop's closed. I'm not answering no more questions. *Get aht!*"

There was a menace in the last two words as the man thrust his pale head over the counter.

"Just tell me if my cousin has been here," Jon shouted in desperation. "It's a simple question, isn't it?"

Before the man could answer the shop door opened and David came in.

"Want any help, Jon?" he said steadily. "We heard what you said. We're sure Penny has been here. Mackie had just found this green handkerchief behind a poster board outside. This is hers, isn't it?"

"Yes it is. Look. There's her initials in the corner. This man says he hasn't seen her."

"Nan then! Nah then!" the fat bully wheezed. "Aht yer all go. I'm closing the shop. How am I s'posed to know what silly kids look in my winder. *Get aht!*"

There wasn't much else they could do. His bulk seemed to fill the tiny shop. He pressed them back and suddenly they were outside and the door was slammed in their faces. They heard the bolts shoot home.

"What's happened? Who was that horrible man?" the twins were asking. "Why don't you tell us?"

Jon and David stood staring at the closed door. The lights in the shop went out and somewhere down the hill a cat howled.

David spoke first.

"We've got to get home quickly. Come on, twins. Run for it. If Penny isn't there we'll have to tell Dad. Come on."

They raced clown the hill and when they paused for breath at the bottom David spoke again.

"There was a notice in the window you didn't see, Jon. It says 'letters may be addressed here'."

Jon nodded. "Maybe that's the answer. He just said that no Mr. Phillips lived there, but he wouldn't answer about Penny. We know now that she found the shop anyway... Come on, twins. We've got to hurry."

There were many moments during that hectic return journey when the two elder boys regretted bringing the twins. There were no buses, and although Dickie and Mary did their best to keep up, their pace was necessarily slow. They were obviously unhappy and too worried to say much even if they could have found the breath, and at last Jon said, "Do you mind if I run on ahead, David? I'd like to make sure she's at home by now and you won't be very far behind."

Jon could never remember the last quarter mile of that journey back to Brownlow Square. With a feeling of real foreboding he stumbled up the steps and opened the front door. Then he looked on the hall table and saw that only one of the two notes which they had left was still in its place. He took a step forward to see which one had been taken and then stopped as a clear voice, which he suddenly realized was very important to him, spoke from the top of the stairs.

"Why it's you, Jon," Penny said. "You look awful. What's happened? I do think you might have stayed in to greet me. I hate coming into empty houses."

"Do you really?" he said quietly. She looked very nice standing up there with her red hair shining and the green beads he had given her in Paris round her neck.

"Do you really?" and he sat on the bottom stair, put his head in his hands and began to laugh.

5. The Picture Plot

Next morning, James Wilson, the *Evening Clarion* reporter, woke late without an alarm in his two-roomed flat. Today was his day off and he intended to make the most of it.

He had good reason to be pleased with life for a few weeks ago he had not only become engaged to be married but had been lucky enough to rent this flat from a friend who had gone abroad.

Judith, whom Wilson quite naturally believed to be the most wonderful girl in the world, was an art student, and as it would be at least a year before they could marry he was very glad to move into the sort of bachelor's flat he had always wanted. It was just off Gray's Inn Road in a row of what had once been the homes of coachmen and ostlers who lived above their horses in the days of carriages and pairs. His flat was small but the living-room (in which he also slept on a divan bed and in which he ate when he was at home) was big enough to entertain at least four friends. The other room had a small gas cooker, a refrigerator, a bath and a sink and was rather overcrowded.

On this particular morning it was half past nine when Wilson, in a gay dressing-gown, came out of his bathroom whistling cheerfully, pushed some papers off one end of the table in the living-room, removed his typewriter from the other and then spread on it a check cloth which had obviously already been well used.

He plugged in a coffee percolator, grilled some bacon and boiled an egg (he liked bacon and egg this way) and then cut himself three slices of bread. Then he found two clean plates and a large cup for the coffee which he liked nearly black.

Before he sat down he opened his "front door" and picked up his bundle of daily papers. He found nothing of particular interest until he turned to the woman's page of the third paper. There, in what is sometimes called the

gossip column, were a few lines which made him say "Ha!" very cheerfully and put his coffee cup down on the tablecloth instead of in the saucer.

The writer of the column was describing some of the presents on display at a fashionable wedding, and the words which Wilson marked with a red pencil were,

"I was particularly interested to see that among the bride's gifts to the groom was one of the delightful old flower prints by William Johnson which have become so popular during the past few months. I am told that the demand for these exquisite pictures has made them extremely valuable and that many people are turning out their attics and searching among their Victorian relics for any of these discarded treasures"

As soon as he had finished his breakfast and put the dirty dishes in the sink, Wilson cut out the gossip column and clipped it to a number of cuttings in a file which he took from his desk. Then he put the file away, went to the telephone and dialled a familiar number. His call was answered by the voice he wanted to hear.

"Hullo, Judith," he said. "This is your James speaking. I'm not working today, but why aren't you...? This afternoon? Good. Will you please lunch with me today? Not just because you would like to do so, but because I've got some more news for you about old Johnson... There's another reference to him this morning and I'm more certain than ever that we're right about this, and that there's going to be a big story for us and the *Clarion* very soon... *What did you say?* It's only because of old Johnson that you're coming? Of course. Twelve o'clock then. I'll be washed up and tidy by then... 'Bye."

He devoted the next quarter of an hour to restoring some order to the living-room and making the bed look like a divan again, and was just wondering which of his ties to wear to please Judith when the telephone bell rang. He hoped that it wasn't the News Editor of the *Clarion* calling him out to an important and urgent job. Just for a moment he wondered whether he would let it ring because he didn't want to put Judith off. Then he lifted the receiver.

"Is that Mr. James Wilson of the *Clarion*?"

Wilson's heart sank as he admitted his identity.

"Good. I rang your office and they said you weren't in today so we thought we ought to try the number you gave us... This is Jon speaking. Jonathan Warrender. You remember us, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Jon. Got any exciting news for me?"

"I'm sure we have. Might be more important than your flower prints. I don't want to tell you over the telephone but we'd like you to know right away. May we come and see you now? It really is urgent."

Wilson barely hesitated. He'd already had good reason to trust these boys and girls and he thought he knew Jon and David well enough to be sure that they wouldn't waste his time.

"Very well, Jon. Come now. The address is 4c, Rosemary Court, half-way down Gray's Inn Road on the right hand side... What's that you say? You're all in this. Yes, of course. All come... 'Bye."

Then he remembered that Judith was coming to lunch and that she didn't know about the Lone Piners and that the latter might well be rather surprised to hear about her!

While waiting for the Lone Pine expedition, he wondered whether to telephone Judith again and warn her as to what she might find, but eventually decided not to do so. She might have said she wouldn't come.

He heard the expedition before he saw it and, as he had feared, its arrival was heralded by the barking of a dog. Sheba, his Siamese cat, cocked an ear and flexed her claws as Wilson opened the window and leaned out. He first saw the twins in their duffle coats. The boy had the Scottie on a lead, but the dog was trying to strangle himself as a black and white cat on a first floor window-sill opposite looked down at him disdainfully. Then the other three came into the Mews and Penny looked up and waved to him. "Hullo!

What a wonderful place to live. May we all come up? We couldn't leave the twins behind."

The twins turned round and Mary hauled Macbeth to her and scooped him into her arms.

"Good morning, Mr. Wilson," Dickie said. "We remember you very well. We've got vital news for you. Where's your front door? There are lots of doors round here."

"Good morning to you, twins. I'm very pleased to see you, but you, must leave your dog down there please because of my cat. Sheba doesn't like dogs. Tie him up to the door post, if you don't mind."

"But you're not *serious*," Mary pleaded. "You don't really mean that? You couldn't really be so cruel as to leave him all alone and tied up out here? We used to think you were nice but then o' course you didn't have a cat then."

"Sorry, Mary, but I do mean it. I've only got one room and I don't want a fight in it. The door is marked 4c, so come on up."

Rather to Wilson's surprise Mary didn't argue. David said something to her which he couldn't hear, tied the dog lead to the post and then they all trooped upstairs.

"Thank you for telephoning, Jon," Wilson said when he had welcomed them. "What's your news? Found some more flower prints?"

"It's a long story really. We've all got something to add to it, which is why we all came. We hope you're not in too much of a hurry but we do think we're going to surprise you."

"When I knew you before, I sometimes called you James," Penny said. "I'm going to call you James again and I hope you don't mind... I can see by the look in your eye that you've got something on your mind, James. What is it? Who's going to tell their story first?"

Wilson laughed. He never had been able to resist Penny.

"You're right. I have got something on my mind besides my story. I've just got engaged to a wonderful girl called Judith and she's coming to lunch with me today. I'm very, very pleased to see you all, but I'm sure you'll understand if I ask you to tell your story as quickly as you can... I'm rather excited about Judith..."

There was a long and rather shy silence and then Penny, with very pink cheeks, got up and held out her hand.

"We're all very excited about your Judith too, James. Of course, I'm madly jealous. I don't quite know what people like us say to someone like you when they get engaged, but we're all very, very glad... What's Judith like?"

David and Jon shook hands with Wilson and the twins just grinned and sat on the edge of their chair swinging their legs. Then Wilson laughed.

"Thank you very much. You're a grand lot and I don't know what I was thinking of to suggest that you should hurry. I phoned Judith before you rang this morning, Jon, so she doesn't know about you. I think she should know you and I want you to see her and to know that Penny approves... I've got a better idea. David can telephone his mother now and tell her that you are all going to stay to lunch with Judith and me. We'll have a picnic in here and you can all go shopping for me in Gray's Inn Road. Get rolls and butter and some exciting cheese - and celery if you like it. Judith loves celery. Buy some fruit and jam tarts and cakes if the twins like those. And you'd better get some bottles of fizzy drinks if that's what you like and we'll see if I've got enough coffee... Here you are, Penny. You're in charge. Here's a pound and be sure you bring me some change. Take Jon and the twins while David telephones and then gives me a hand here."

"Don't tell him anything vital until we come back," Jon said to David while Penny took the housekeeping money from Wilson and whispered, "Are you only inviting us so as not to upset us? You don't have to ask us, you know... Sure? Thank you. We think this is very nice of you."

The shops were near and although Penny was an impetuous rather than a methodical shopper, they were back in half an hour, by which time Wilson and David had pushed the furniture back against the walls. While they were

laying the table and cutting sandwiches Jon and David between them told Wilson about the stranger in the fog who ran away because he did not want to be recognized, and of Mr. Sparrow's shop and Harriet, and of the man who was keen to buy old papers. They told him, too, of the man's call at 7, Brownlow Square for more old papers, of their certainty that he was their old enemy "Slinky" Grandon, who finally got rid of Jon by escaping in the Tube train.

Wilson listened attentively and asked one or two shrewd questions, but when the boys had reached the part of the story where they got back to find Penny's note, David said, "You go on from there, Penny. It's your story now."

Penny, who was sitting on the rug in front of the electric fire, smiled as she looked up at her audience.

"I'm not very pleased with myself really. I upset Jon and David and the twins, but I've said I'm sorry... This is what happened to me, James. When the boys had run off down the hill after Slinky I went home and told the twins what had happened. Then I remembered what you had told us about Johnson's flower pictures being rare, and when I realized that we were now sure that Jon's sinister stranger in the fog was Slinky Grandon, I began to think all over again. It seemed to me that if something was rare and wanted by lots of people who would pay a lot of money for that rare thing, then that was the sort of thing that Slinky Grandon would be interested in. And as Slinky had been to Mr. Sparrow's shop for old papers, I thought he *might* have been there asking about Johnson's flower prints. It was a chance, anyway. So I went round and asked Mr. Sparrow who remembered a man talking about flower prints and leaving his name and address. He'd asked Mr. Sparrow to write to him if he got one of these prints.

"The name given was Phillips and the address, 79, Holloway Hill, but although I described Slinky to Mr. Sparrow he couldn't be sure that Phillips was our man. I wrote the note to the boys and Harriet took it round to the twins and I set off for Holloway Hill. I had to ask the way twice and I was scared when I saw it, and jolly nearly quailed and came back, I can tell you. Anyway, an old woman with a loaded basket came along and I offered to carry the basket up the hill for her. She was deaf. She didn't know 79, and

seemed to think I was mad but I was jolly glad to have her with me. When we were nearly at the top of the hill I saw two nasty men come out of a grubby little shop. They stared at me as they passed and when we reached the shop I saw that it was number 79. The old woman shouted that she wanted some cigarettes, so I went in with her.

"The boys will tell you about the awful fat man who keeps that shop. He stared and stared at me with his piggy eyes and I didn't dare to ask him if a Mr. Phillips lived there. When we were both outside again I stopped to look through the window and saw the notice about letters being addressed there, and I suppose I must have dropped my green hankie then. The old woman lived a few doors down the hill and I was just wondering whether I was going to be brave enough to go down to the main road again by myself, when a nurse came out of the house next door and got into her car. I gave the old dear her basket and asked the nurse for a lift. She was nice and I must say she looked surprised when she asked me what I was doing on Holloway Hill, and I said quite truthfully that I'd carried the old witch's basket for her.

"Anyway I was very brave as soon as I was in the car and the nurse took me nearly all the way back to Brownlow Square. Nobody was there, but I found Jon's note saying that they had all gone out to find me and Holloway Hill, and I was very sorry to have worried everybody... But you see, James, that we still haven't proved that Phillips is really Slinky."

Wilson nodded. "Well told, and very, very interesting, but I should make sure that Penny doesn't go off on her own like that again. I think I'd like to take a look at 79, Holloway Hill... There's one thing puzzles me though. Did both you twins sell him the bundle of papers when he called at Brownlow Square yesterday? Surely he would have recognized you? Do you think he did?"

The twins looked at each other and then Dickie spoke for them both. "I don't think so. When the others went out Mary an' me sorted out the really old papers and tied them up and left them in the hall ready for when he came. But he didn't come until after Mummy and Daddy had gone out, and then Mary was upstairs with Mackie doing something or other when he knocked on the door.

He was in a terrific hurry, but he looked at some of the old picture papers in the bundle and said they were fine and gave me ten bob and dashed out before I could do any more financial with him if you see what I mean."

"I don't quite see, Dickie. Didn't he look at you and didn't you recognize him?"

"No, I didn't. He seemed a rather nasty little man."

"I forgot to tell you," Penny broke in. "I asked Harriet whether he had called back there for the papers the twins left, but he hadn't. P'raps he was scared to go back there so soon. It's all very peculiar and sinister."

"It's fantastic," Dickie said proudly and then they heard running footsteps on the stairs, the door was flung open and a charming voice said, "Jimmy darling, there's a wonderful little Scottie dog tied up outside----- Oh! I *am* sorry. Is this a meeting or something private?"

Jon and David stood up and Penny uncurled herself from the hearthrug. She never forgot her first sight of Judith as she stood on the threshold with her deep blue eyes wide with surprise. She was small - not much bigger than Penny herself - and wearing a blue cloak with a scarlet lining. Her hair was ash-blond and parted severely in the centre and coiled over her ears. Everything about her looked delightful. She was young and gay and eager, and as Wilson moved towards her, her eyes lit up with happiness.

"But what is all this, Jimmy," she said as he took her cloak. "You all look very nice and----- Oh! You two are twins! I should like to paint you. Do *please*, somebody, tell me who you all are."

Wilson hauled the twins out of their chair and gently pushed Judith into it. Then he introduced them and told Judith where and how they had met before, and how he had seen them again in the antique shop in Chelsea yesterday.

When he had finished, Judith took Penny's hand and sat her down on the arm of her chair.

"I'm always learning something new about this man," she said. "Almost every day something comes up from his past. I hope every other dark secret of his is as nice as you all are. Now let's eat. I'm hungry. I never have any elevenses when Jimmy asks me to lunch."

The picnic meal was a great success and before it was over Judith put herself right with the twins for life by suggesting that Sheba should be sent out for a while and Macbeth brought in to enjoy a few scraps and some friendly company after so long a spell of solitude. Macbeth appreciated it very much. Sheba did not.

When they had cleared away, Wilson said to Judith, "I think we ought to tell them everything. You've heard what they've discovered and I've an idea things will move fast soon. It's your story as much as mine, darling. You started it. Do you mind?"

Judith looked at them all and smiled.

"Jimmy is lucky. We all seem to be after the same thing and that is to help him get his scoop story... I'll tell them, Jimmy... Please don't interrupt unless you must, but I'll be as quick as I can... About three months ago, before we were engaged, Jimmy read an article in a magazine about Johnson's flower prints. They are lovely pictures and most of them were painted about 1870. The writer of this article praised them and because Jimmy knows that I love that sort of thing he bought me one.

"It is a beauty of a wild rose. We were showing it to somebody at home one day and I dropped it and broke the glass and split the frame and Jimmy took it away to have it reframed at a shop he knows near Fleet Street. He took it to the office and the *Clarion's* Art Critic saw it on his desk and asked if he could examine it. To his surprise - and most certainly to Jimmy's and mine - he said that this particular print was a clever fake. There's no need to tell you now why he was sure, but he showed us enough to make me believe that he is right.

"Jimmy went back to the shop where he bought it and they were very decent and offered to return their profit to him. Anyway, since then Johnson's flower prints are often mentioned in the papers and we believe

this is being done deliberately and that some crooks are at work forging these famous old pictures, creating a demand for them and then selling them - one here and there, of course - to junk shops and good class antique shops. We both got very excited about all this and Jimmy wants to solve the mystery and get the full story before he tells the police. What we are doing is to ask in every antique shop and junk shop that we can for Johnson's flower prints... It is all rather exciting, isn't it?"

The twins' eyes were almost starting out of their heads but Jon and David looked very worried. Penny was just about to speak when Wilson said, "Judith has told our story very well. It doesn't sound too good, does it?... I can't help feeling that your man Grandon or Phillips isn't big enough for this game. A nasty little man paying a few shillings for bundles of old papers would not want to buy Johnson's flower prints from your friend, Mr. Sparrow."

Penny clapped her hand to her head.

"What a fool I am! I can't remember whether Mr. Sparrow said that the man who called himself Phillips wanted to *buy* Johnson's prints or *sell* them. P'raps he offered to sell them if Mr. Sparrow was asked for one. But he left an address which we've seen, and it's not the sort of place where anybody except that fat pig of a man would live if they could help it."

"We can ask Mr. Sparrow again," Jon said. "Maybe we can help him to remember. I'm sure that 79, Holloway Hill is only an address from which he collects his letters. The only way of finding out would be to watch the shop until he turns up one day."

"And that won't be easy," David said grimly. "There's nothing that any of us like about Holloway Hill... Anyway, perhaps James can suggest what we can best do to help? We'll do what we can."

"I hate to suggest it," Penny said. "But it does seem that Slinky must be living somewhere near us in north London and it ought to be our job to patrol likely places until we see him again. We'll have to arrange to ring up James - or Judith, if she's get-at-able - as soon as we find him again."

"I'm not always get-at-able," Judith smiled. "I work a lot; but I'll give you my number at home and at the art school... I'll tell you what puzzles me about your Slinky person. Nothing that you've told us about him suggests that he's the master-brain behind all this. I s'pose you hope that he may lead you to the master forger eventually?"

Jon whipped off his spectacles.

"Now I see it all. I know who the master forger could be! Miss Ballinger herself, who always used Slinky Grandon and her niece Valerie. She was a brilliant artist, wasn't she? She was behind the attempt to steal the smugglers' treasure at the *Dolphin*. And don't you remember that she ran an antique shop called *The Grasshopper* when she was behind the smuggling and when we first met James? Of course the Ballinger is behind all this. Find her and you've got your story."

6. London Town

While the Lone Piners with their friends are trying to trace the elusive Slinky Grandon we can do something that they cannot. We can look at four different scenes in London on the same day and wonder what the happenings we see have to do with the plot suspected by James Wilson and Judith.

The first is one of those small, smart and exclusive dress shops which show only a bowl of flowers in the window. This one is in a quiet street not very far from Hyde Park Corner. The front of the house - there are three floors above the respectable shop front - is painted pale yellow and the front door is grey. The name above the window written in small letters is *Christabel*. Inside, the soft carpet is dove grey and the curtains hanging from floor to ceiling to divide the reception room from the salon are sage green.

A taxi drives up to *Christabels* and a pretty, dark girl gets out. She smiles as she pays the driver and speaks to him with an American accent.

"Good luck, Miss Gray," the man says as he touches his cap.

"Isn't that real cute of you, driver? You know who I am."

"There's plenty of us knows Lucinda Gray on the pictures, miss. When I get home tonight I wouldn't like to say whether my old missus or my boy will envy me most. I'd take it very kind of you if you'd sign your name for me three times," and he fumbled in the inside pocket of his coat for a piece of paper.

Miss Gray looked round to see if there was a crowd collecting, but did not hesitate when she realized that there was nobody else in sight.

"Surely I will, driver, and thank you for asking me," and she signed a flamboyant, sprawling "Lucinda Gray" three times across the envelope which the driver produced after many gropings. Then she smiled the smile

which means so much to millions of film-goers and opened the grey door of *Christabels*.

She stood for a moment, impressed by the elegance of one of the most famous dress shops in London, and then the curtains parted and a smartly-dressed, elderly woman stepped forward to greet her. She was a big woman with blue-rinsed, greying hair - not particularly good-looking and wearing very strong-lensed spectacles with blue frames. Her voice was rather harsh and loud.

"Good morning. I can see that you are Miss Lucinda Gray. It was thoughtful of you to telephone and say that you were coming, for I have arranged to give you my personal attention."

Two hours went by before Lucinda stepped out on to the grey carpet between the rich curtains.

"Thank you vurry, vurry much, Madame Christabel. I'm sure I'll be real delighted with all those lovely things. I'll be at the Trocadero Hotel for ten days so you can send anything right on to me there... I'll say I like your old London vurry much, Madame. It's kinda small but there's a lot to see."

"We like our American friends to enjoy what we have to offer, Miss Gray, but there are many parts of London that only a Londoner can tell you about. You must allow me to help you. I know many interesting people. Don't hesitate to ask me if I can be of service."

Lucinda opened her beautiful eyes very wide. She knew that she had just spent a great deal of money with this woman but it was kind of her to offer to show her round.

"You're real kind," she smiled. "I'll remember that. Right now I'm interested in seeing old places and old things. My folks way back home are crazy on old furniture and glass and your beautiful china, and I'm reckoning to take them back something real good. Maybe you could advise the right places to go where I could see some of these old things?"

Christabel nodded. "I could do that, Miss Gray. I am glad you asked me, for my friends are good enough to say that I am something of an expert on antiques. What are you particularly interested in? Do please sit down. I really think that I shall be able to help you and I can assure you it will give me great pleasure - collecting is my hobby."

Lucinda sat down carefully on a spindly little chair. This rather overwhelming woman seemed now to be showing more interest in antiques than in clothes. She frowned prettily. "What I really want, Madame, is some beautiful thing that is rare. I want to take my folks something that maybe no one else in the whole United States has got."

"I have an idea for you," she smiled. "In this country during the last year or so there has been much interest in the coloured prints of about one hundred years ago. Fox-hunting scenes have nearly always been popular and so have Cries of London. The craze just now is for a series of flower pictures by an artist called William Johnson who was drawing them between 1870 and 1880. These prints are rare and fetching big prices. Would you care to see one? I have a beauty upstairs. I found it in a London shop only four weeks ago."

"A real gen-u-ine Johnson flower print! But this is wonderful, Madame. Thank you. I would indeed like to see it."

So Madame Christabel led her client up to her flat and showed her an exquisite picture of a wild rose. Although the paper on which it was printed was yellow and a little cracked with age, the pink of the petals still looked deliciously fresh.

When Lucinda looked at this treasure and saw how old and beautiful it was, she determined that one at least of these prints must go home with her for the old folks who now had a new house with an enormous swimming pool but with nothing old in it. "It's real beautiful, Madame, and it's just what I want... Thank you vurry much for letting me see it... I suppose you wouldn't...?"

Madame Christabel took the print firmly and hung it on the wall.

"No, Miss Gray. I will not sell this to you or to anyone else. Although it is not for sale I thought you would like to see it... There are, I am told, between forty and fifty different subjects in this series. William Johnson was a keen botanist as well as a very fine artist... Now I must ask you to excuse me. Everything will be sent round to your hotel when ready."

She led the way downstairs and for a long minute Lucinda had nothing to say. She felt that she had been snubbed, but at the door she found her voice again.

"I would appreciate it vurry much, Madame, if you could give me the address of any of your stores or shops where they might have one of these flower pictures. There's nothing I'd rather take home with me than one of them."

The great Christabel smiled.

"I can't be sure where you will find one, but I will give you the name and address of a man who might be able to get you one."

Lucinda took a card from her bag and wrote as Christabel said, "Harry Hartman, 19, Bellfields Street, E.C.4. It is a small shop in a narrow street' between Holborn and Fleet Street, but a taxi will take you there."

A few hours later the London scene changes to yet another shop - that of Mr. Harry Hartman, of 19, Bellfields Street. Mr. Hartman is a little man with bowed shoulders. He is wearing a black jacket and striped trousers and a grey tie with a pearl pin in it. His eyes, under bushy brows, are dark and piercing; his thinning hair is white and he wears a little grizzled beard.

Bellfields Street has only a few shops in it and there is nothing very distinguished about Mr. Hartman's from the outside. Unlike Mr. Sparrow, away in north London, he does not display any of his goods on the narrow pavement. Inside it is rather gloomy.

When a young woman with a flat parcel under her arm opened the door, Mr. Hartman came in through curtains at the back of the shop and switched on some more lights.

The girl, who looked to be in her early twenties, was well-groomed and smiled rather shyly as Mr. Hartman greeted her.

"Good afternoon," she said a little breathlessly. "What beautiful things you have here. I come this way sometimes on my way to the office but I've never really plucked up enough courage to come in and ask if I may look round."

Mr. Hartman shrugged his shoulders.

"Those who are interested in nice things are always welcome. Are you looking for anything special?"

"Not really. I love old china and glass. My father was a collector but now that he's dead all the best things have had to be sold... I do hope you don't mind me chattering like this but really, Mr. Hartman - you are Mr. Hartman, aren't you? Oh, I am so glad - really I've come to ask your advice because I want to sell something and I'm not really sure what it's worth.

"The point is," she went on in her engaging, slightly breathless way, "the point is that I need some money very badly and I have something here which I believe is rather valuable... I read somewhere that lots of people are collecting old-fashioned prints of flowers and that they will pay big prices for them. Is that true, Mr. Hartman?"

"That depends, young lady. Have you one of those pictures to show me? Is that what you wanted to ask my advice about?"

"Yes indeed, Mr. Hartman, That's what I wanted to ask you. I read in an article that flower pictures painted by a man called Johnson nearly a hundred years ago are the most valuable. I've got one of them here. It's a picture of honeysuckle. I'll show you," and she began to fiddle clumsily at the knotted string round her parcel.

"Allow me," Mr. Hartman said softly. "I have a penknife."

She stood close to him as he cut the string, stripped off the brown paper and held the picture under the light.

He turned the framed picture over and looked at the back and then examined the print again with a magnifying glass. Then he put it down and looked at her shrewdly.

"Where did you get this, miss? Is it your own, I mean?"

"Oh yes. It was my father's you see and now we're having to sell all his things... Do please tell me what it's worth? It's very, very important to me."

"Very well. I have no doubt that this is a Johnson flower print and it certainly has a value. I have no customer waiting for one but have no doubt that I could sell it... I will give forty pounds for it."

"Forty pounds, Mr. Hartman? I did think that it would be worth more than that. It's fifty pounds that I really want."

"So it wasn't my advice that you wanted as much as fifty pounds. I will give you forty and my advice is that you take it before I say thirty."

The girl laughed but it was not a very gay laugh. "Of course you're joking, Mr. Hartman. I think you're very hard really, but I will take forty pounds because we need the money so badly. Will you give it to me in pound notes please - not a cheque."

"Wait here," he said. "I will fetch the money."

When Mr. Hartman returned and had counted out forty pound notes into her hand she said, "Thank you very much. I know that you are buying and selling things all day long, but you can't guess how important this is to me and how much you have helped us... If I could bring you another of these Johnson's flower pictures would you give me fifty pounds for it?"

Mr. Hartman tried not to show his surprise.

"Have you another, then? Why did you not bring them both?"

"I haven't got another now, but I'm sure that another member of our family has one. My aunt, actually. Daddy's sister. Would you give me fifty pounds for it?"

"Yes, I would. When can you bring it?"

"I'm not quite sure, but I'll come along some time."

"Will you give me your name and address, miss. I might want to get in touch with you quickly if I can find a customer."

The girl hesitated.

"I haven't got a real address just at the moment. We're looking for somewhere else to live, you see, and it's all very uncertain, but if you write to me at the main post office at Charing Cross I shall get it because I call there every day... My name? How silly of me. It's Miss Smith. Miss Dorothy Smith... Good-bye, and thank you very much for your kindness."

Half an hour later another young woman came into the shop. Miss Dorothy Smith had been quite attractive, but she was only a pale shadow of a woman when compared with the breath-taking vision that now smiled at Mr. Hartman.

"Of course you'll know that I'm an American just as soon as I open my mouth, and although you won't know my name I guess that you're Mr. Harry Hartman... Am I right, Mr. Hartman?"

He bowed. "I am Mr. Hartman and you may feel that I am a stupid old man not to know your name. I apologize, but how do you know mine?"

"I'm a vurry lucky girl, Mr. Hartman. My name is Lucinda Gray and things are going right for me just now. I was given your name this morning by someone who is trying to help me buy some nice things to take back home with me the week after next. I'll not waste your time but I'm asking you right now if you've got any of those old flower pictures done by a cute old guy called William Johnson about 1870. I was told that you might be able to get me one or more to take back home with me."

Mr. Hartman had been in business for many years. He was used to surprises. Sometime he was lucky and sometimes not, but never before had anything like this happened to him. And this remarkable and decorative

young woman had actually asked for "one or more" Johnson's flower prints within half an hour of Miss Smith selling him one and offering to supply another. He felt a little dizzy and to steady himself put one hand on the table behind him.

"It so happens that I have a beautiful specimen of William Johnson's work, Miss Gray. The price is one hundred guineas. Allow me to show you."

Lucinda went into raptures over Mr. Johnson's honeysuckle and was out into Bellfields Street within ten minutes. She left a fragrance behind her and Mr. Hartman sighed a little as he went into his office. First he put a most satisfactory cheque in his safe and then sitting at his desk he wrote on a pad the words, "Lucinda Gray, Trocadero Hotel, W.1," and then he took a sheet of his notepaper and wrote:

Dear Miss Smith. Further to your call here today when I purchased from you one of William Johnson's flower prints. I think you mentioned that you might be able to offer me another one of these pictures for the sum of fifty pounds. I shall be pleased to conclude this deal as soon as possible. Perhaps you will telephone me letting me know how soon you can deliver the picture.

Yours faithfully,

H. Hartman.

He read this through carefully, put it in the envelope and then wrote the address - Miss Dorothy Smith, Poste Restante, Chief Post Office, Charing Cross, London, W.C.2.

It had been a satisfactory day.

The next London scene is yet another antique shop but one which we have visited already. It is the shop in Boscombe Street just off the King's Road in Chelsea with the name Mervyn Brown above the window. Just about the time that the glamorous Lucinda was visiting Mr. Hartman, Penny and Judith walked into Brown's. They had rehearsed the scene they intended to play and found in the process that they liked each other very much. Just as

they opened the door, Penny whispered, "She's very, very superior and has a long cigarette holder. She treated us like scum and I detest her... Pretend you've got a lot of money to spend, Judith."

The superior woman looked just the same. Same tweed suit, same expensive-looking brooch in her lapel, same cigarette holder. Her glance flicked over Penny without recognition and then settled on Judith. Most people looked more than once at *her*.

"Good afternoon," Judith smiled. "A man my fiance knows told him that he sold you a Johnson's flower print a day or so ago. I'm very anxious to give one of these prints as a wedding present. Have you still got it and if so, may I see it, please."

The woman removed the cigarette holder from her painted lips.

"I have two prints in stock. I promised a young man that he should see them, but if you are serious in your enquiry I can show them to you. The price of each is eighty guineas. Are you still interested?"

"Very," said Judith coldly.

The woman nodded and fetched two framed prints from the drawer of a tall-boy at the back of the shop. Judith took one eagerly to the door and examined it carefully while Penny held the other. They were beautiful pictures - one of pansies and the other of purple clematis.

"They *look* lovely," she said at last. "I wonder whether this man who told my fiance about you, really did sell these pictures to you? We're curious to know."

"Surely that is irrelevant?" the woman said through clenched teeth gripping the cigarette holder. "Are you interested in purchasing one of these pictures?"

"Yes, I am," Judith admitted, "but we've a special reason for finding out whether the man who sold you these is the man Mr. Wilson knows."

"I cannot remember everybody who comes in here to sell me something, and if I could I don't see why-----"

Penny interrupted her.

"Please don't worry about trying to remember. We'll tell you what our man is like. He's small and he wears a light-coloured coat with a belt. Sometimes he wears a big checked cap and sometimes an ordinary felt hat with a big brim. He's pale and hasn't got a moustache or anything like that and he often smokes rather horrid little black cigars... Is that the man who sold you these two pictures?"

Judith was watching the woman carefully while Penny was speaking and had no doubt that the girl's description of Slinky startled her.

"I don't think I should forget a man like that, although now that you mention it I do seem to remember the cigar."

"If he left his name and address I should be very grateful if you could give it to us."

The woman put her cigarette on an ash-tray and gave Judith a hard stare.

"I'm not quite sure why you have come here but I do not like your questions. Even if I did know this man's name and address I should not be likely to pass it on to a casual enquirer... The price of these flower prints is eighty guineas each. If you care to leave a deposit of £10 I will keep one for you until tomorrow. I shall want your name and address of course."

"May I look at the clematis picture please, Penny," Judith said without giving the woman a direct answer, and then took it over to the door and examined it as carefully as she had the other.

"Make up your mind, please," the woman said sharply.

"I have," Judith replied. "Of course, I cannot be sure but I am an artist and I believe that both these prints are fakes. If you will look at the colouring very carefully I think that-----"

"How dare you make such a suggestion?" the woman gasped. "How dare you? What do you know about such things? Do you realize you are accusing me of selling forgeries?"

"I didn't say that you knew they were. I'm saying that I *think* they are forgeries, but I suppose we could soon settle it by getting further advice?"

"Nonsense! Ridiculous nonsense! You don't know what you're talking about... Just look at these pictures," and she snatched one up. "Look at this. Surely you can see that the paper is old? See the spots on it and the discoloration. It's yellow with age. And look at the frame. It's cracked... Look for yourself," and then she turned the picture over. "See this? Here's your proof. This paper pasted over the backboard is a page from the *Illustrated London News* and it's actually got the date of issue printed on it. See for yourself. 1879... There it is in black and white. This frame and the picture inside it cannot have been touched for eighty years."

She sounded almost hysterical and as she paused for breath the three stared at each other in silence until Penny, white-faced with excitement, suddenly clutched Judith's arm and dragged her out of the shop.

The next London scene is very different. Two men in their shirt-sleeves and with green eye-shades on their fore-heads are sitting on high stools working under special electric lamps at sloping drawing boards on a bench littered with artists' materials. The studio is long and narrow and must be at the top of a house because the only window is a skylight, covered on the inside by a blind. At one end is a closed door and at the other, apparently fixed to the wall, are shelves on which are books, magazines, cups, tea-pot and milk bottle and a telephone. The narrow room is hazy with stale cigarette smoke and one of the men, who is pale-faced and bearded, coughs incessantly as he works. He has, clipped to his drawing board, an outline drawing which is a copy of William Johnson's flower picture of clematis. At his side is one of the finished prints in colour; with great skill he is copying this and tinting the forged print on his board.

The other man, who is tall and thin and bald, is working on one of the clematis prints already coloured by his partner. He is putting spots and thin

lines on the paper to make it look old. A blob of cigarette ash falls on to the paper. He blows it away, gets off his stool and stretches.

"You want to do something about that cough of yours, George... How long you going to be with that one? It's the last today, isn't it?"

George coughed again and cursed softly.

"Half an hour maybe and then I'm through... I've been meaning to tell you, Bill, but I reckon I'm going to chuck this soon. I know the money is good, but I'm sick of this cloak and dagger mystery business. I'm ruining my health and I like to know who I'm working for. We're treated like kids and I swear we'll be caught one of these days climbing up and down that fire escape. I'm sick of it."

Bill pushed his eye-shade up on to his bald head, grinned and lit another cigarette.

"I'm not so sure that the money is good enough. These prints are going well, I reckon. I got a pal of mine to ask for a Johnson's in a good shop the other day and they're fetching up to a hundred guineas. I've been wondering whether we couldn't get a rise, George. There's some would like to know about the way up the fire escape to this room on the roof and what goes on inside it... Trouble is of course that we still don't know who owns the voice on the telephone that gives us our orders."

George coughed again.

"I don't think I want to know who owns the voice. I don't like that voice. It seems different every time I hear it. Sometimes I reckon it belongs to an old man. Sometimes I've thought it's a foreigner. Sometimes it croaks as if it had a cold and once it reminded me of a woman's. I reckon we're better off if we don't ask questions and let things be... Get the last print drying now, will you, and if you've finished yours put it in."

Bill nodded and moved along to the end of the bench and from a shallow zinc tray removed one of the finished flower pictures and clipped it to a wooden rack where three similar prints were already drying. The liquid in

the tray was a very light brown and the pictures which had been soaked in it now had the appearance of age; they were the colour of old parchment.

"Good idea this," Bill said as he stood back. "Rum to think that, with all what they call the progress of science, the stuff that dyes this best is coffee... Have a cup?"

George nodded, but while Bill was pouring out two cups from the percolator the telephone buzzed. The two men looked at each other and then George got off his stool and lifted the receiver.

"Number six speaking," he said, and the familiar voice rasped in reply.

"How many clematis today?"

"Just finished five."

"Good enough. No more flowers. Tomorrow you start on Rowley's hunting scenes and the first batch, with originals for copying, will be on the bench by ten o'clock. Pack up now and be out in fifteen minutes."

There was a click and George replaced the receiver.

"No more flowers. Hunting scenes tomorrow. I'm sick of this, Bill. Never even a chance to make a protest."

"Or ask for a rise." Bill grinned. "We'll have to leave a note one day. Somebody must bring the work and the cash but it may not be the boss with the voice. Maybe we'll meet a fair stranger on the fire escape one day? Do we pack up now? Good enough, then. A-hunting we will go tomorrow."

George locked the door behind them and pocketed the key.

A welcome blast of fresh, cool wind rushed into the stuffy room as the two men stepped out on to the flat leaded roof above the lights of London.

"You first, Bill. See you at ten tomorrow. Good night."

In the work room which they had left all was quiet and dark for ten minutes. Then the silence was broken by a slight click and a line of orange light appeared on the wall behind the shelves... The secret door opened slowly and in the gap a hand appeared.

7. Harriet on Her Own

When, in Wilson's flat in Rosemary Court, Jon had suddenly reminded them all of Miss Ballinger, David jumped up and thumped him on the back.

"Of course you're right, Jon. What fools we've been. That's the link clear enough. She was an artist when we first knew her and when we met her again she was selling antiques as James knows very well."

"Do, do, do *please* somebody tell me what you are all talking about," Judith pleaded. "Who is this mysterious Ballinger and what has she got to do with the man you call Slinky?"

They all tried to explain to her, until she put her hands over her ears and begged them to stop. Wilson restored order and then asked her if she was going to work this afternoon.

"We don't want to tempt you away from your artistic studies, Judith, but as we're now all mixed up in this business I think we ought to take this opportunity of making some plans."

Judith sighed. "I don't *have* to go, of course, and I'm very intrigued about this Ballinger woman, so please tell me all."

They settled down again and Wilson took a pad of paper on his knee ready to take notes.

"You start, Jon. Tell us again about the Ballinger."

"We know that she's a bad lot and we've run across her twice. Penny and I met her first in a Hastings train when we were on our way to the *Dolphin* for the first time, and come to think of it she nearly always looked exactly the same whenever we saw her afterwards. She was big and rather inclined to waddle. Her hair was untidy and greying and she always seemed to wear brown tweed suits with a pattern of squares on them-----"

"Checks, dear," Penny interrupted. "That's what they're called. Carry on. You're doing fine. She really was a hideous old thing, wasn't she?"

"As I was saying before I was interrupted," Jon went on. "She always wore a checked brown suit and heavy shoes. She was a tweedy sort of person and never seemed to care how awful she looked. She was short-sighted and wore strong glasses and had an ugly harsh voice. She hates us just because we've put more than one spoke in her wheel - more by luck than anything else, I suppose. We're all sure that she really is a good artist because we've seen some of her pictures, haven't we, David?"

"Yes, we have. I'm sure they're genuine and good."

"Anyway," Jon continued, "the point of all this is that we know she's an artist, we know that she's interested in antiques and we know that she's been on the wrong side of the law more than once."

"You really must let someone else besides Jon speak sometimes," Penny interrupted. "There are other things we know too. We know that she always employed Slinky Grandon in one way or another, so it's quite likely that she still does."

"She's not paying him very well, then," Jon said grimly. "He looks on his last legs, but we all know what Penny means. Grandon could lead us to Ballinger if she's behind this business of selling faked flower prints."

Penny winked at Judith.

"The Ballinger had another accomplice too, Judith. She has a pretty niece called Valerie who was very fond of Jon. She was old enough to know better too because she was quite as old as you. You haven't seen Valerie about, have you, Jon?"

"Don't be an idiot, Penny. Of course I haven't seen her, but if anyone does they must follow her too in case she leads us to Auntie. You do see, don't you, James, that the Ballinger could be running all this?"

"I do indeed, Jon. Perhaps she's running another antique shop in London... What is it, twins? You're in trouble again."

"Nobody takes any notice of us," Dickie protested, "but we want you to know that if there are two people in the whole world that Mackie *utterly loathes* those two are Slinky and Ballinger. He'll know them wherever he sees them. We can trust him."

"That's an idea," David said quickly. "Maybe you twins with Mackie could do some hunting round our part of the world. It does look as if he's working or living up there. You do agree, don't you, James, that the tracing and following of Grandon is very important?"

"Yes, I do, and all of you can help tremendously by taking that on. Judith and I will concentrate on antique shops and try to trace anybody who is offering old prints for sale. We've proved that to be happening. I'm keeping a list and making a map with red dots to show where Johnson's flower prints are being bought and sold. The trouble is of course that not all the Johnsons being sold are fakes. There must be some of the real thing about, mustn't there, Judith?"

"I suppose so. The fakes are very clever, but I think I could spot them now. It's all in the actual colouring - whoever is tinting them can only use modern colours... I've got an idea, Jimmy. Penny and I will do a district this afternoon and go into every antique and junk shop. We'll start on Chelsea and you could do Kensington, where there are lots. I'd like Penny with me, and it's silly for three of us to be working the same area."

"And what about us?" David asked. "Concentrate on Grandon, I suppose? We'd better go home now anyway and lay some plans and put the twins and Macbeth on the villain's trail."

"If we can find the villain again," Jon said gloomily. "I missed him once... Where shall we ring you up, James, when we've really got something to report?"

"If I'm not here, you can always leave a message for me at the *Clarion*. You've got that number. We must get results quickly now, but when we can

be a little more certain I shall have to tell the police. In the meantime we might have a stroke of luck. Jon's had one. He met Slinky in the fog. If that hadn't happened we wouldn't have got as far as we have... Are you really going now, twins? Good-bye!"

"Acksherley," Mary said coldly, "we are ready to go now, thank, you, James... You can thoroughly rely on us. We already have an idea about Slinky, haven't we, twin?"

Dickie agreed. "We shall tell David and Jon in due course. It is an utterly fantastic idea and we shall give it to David and Jon although they utterly don't take any notice of us."

"Ring up if you're going to be late, Penny," Jon said as they got ready to go. "Good luck, and buy me a Johnson's flower print as a little present. Try and get it autographed by Slinky."

"But what flower would you like, Jon?"

"Poison Ivy if Slinky signs it!"

Then the three Mortons (four including Macbeth) and Jon said "Good-bye" to Judith and Wilson and Penny and went out into the chill of the waning afternoon. On the bus Mary said, "I s'pose you know that we ought to be doing all this sort of thing through the Club. David and Jon, and I expect Penny too, seem to have forgotten all about the Lone Pine Club. We haven't. We're faithful unto death we are, aren't we, twin? We don't forget we signed our names in the secret book under the Lone Pine in our own blood... We've got an idea about Slinky but we think we ought to tell you at a club meeting... See what we mean?"

"All right!" David laughed. "We see, but we can't have a proper meeting with only so few members. Penny's not here and neither is Peter or Tom or Jenny. Tell us your wonderful idea now."

But this they refused to do until they were back at Brownlow Square and Mrs. Morton had left them alone round the fire in the sitting-room.

As soon as she had closed the door behind her, Jon said, "I came here for a rest but haven't felt so exhausted for months. This is a crazy sort of holiday. What are we supposed to do now?"

"Please let us say something now," Mary said as she sat on the hearthrug with Mackie and rolled him on to his back. "We really are keen on this Slinky-Ballinger business... Well, this is what we think, and don't interrupt till I've finished, twin. We all said when we were talking to James and Judith that what we had to do was to find Slinky, follow him and see what he does.

"We agreed that because we think Slinky lives up here somewhere we try and trail him. It's our job, isn't it, Jon?"

" 'Fraud so, Mary. How are we going to set about it? We can't have you two trotting about by yourselves in the dark in places like Holloway Hill. Have you got a map of the area, David? Maybe we ought to do a district each?"

"No, we haven't, but I suppose we could buy one. Wouldn't it be better if we kept a look-out at the bus stops and the tube station? We can't do them all at once, I know, but I don't suppose he *walks* everywhere. Jon knows he doesn't."

"Ha! Ha!" Jon said bitterly. "It's a good idea though."

"We've got a better one," Mary claimed. "This is what we've been thinking about. We know that Slinky has been to Mr. Sparrow's shop at least once. If he really has got something to do with these old pictures and he does go sometimes to junk shops then he might come back to Sparrow's again soon, if you know what I mean."

She paused for breath and David said, "You mean we ought to keep a special watch there? Remember that he knows where we live now and I should think that means he'd keep away from this part of the world. We must warn Harriet and Mr. Sparrow of course and be sure that they let us know if they see him. We could ask old man Sparrow to set a trap for him by writing to him at 79, Holloway Hill. P'raps that would be the best thing to do?"

"It would be better to tell Harriet everything and get her really on our side," Jon suggested. "She's keen and I'm sure that if we ask her to help us she'd do anything."

Mary nodded. "We think she will, too. All the same we mustn't ask her to join the club yet. We haven't known her long enough, and although she rescued Jon she can't be a Lone Piner till we know her better. That's what we think, anyway."

"That's right," Dickie agreed. "Now Mary an' me and Mackie will go round to Mr. Sparrow's fantastic shop and fix everything up with Harriet, and tell her how she's jolly well got to follow old Slinky if she sees him. Jus' you leave that to us."

This started a lot of trouble for, although David and Jon agreed with the twins' reasoning, they were sure that they should not be allowed to go out again on their own after dark. David, in particular, was not likely to forget the experience of Holloway Hill when the twins had been so tired that they could hardly get home again. It took a long time to convince them, but in the end they accepted the suggestion that David could go and see Harriet if Jon stayed with them.

As David set off down the hill to Sparrow's he was very thoughtful. He liked James Wilson and he liked adventure too, but he was not happy about this rather sordid business of the forging of valuable pictures and the sort of atmosphere of Holloway Hill and the nasty little shop at Number 79. The Lone Piners liked to have adventures on their own, but there always came a time when they had to call in the grown-ups, and David had an uneasy feeling that his father should have been told before now just exactly what was happening. He was still worrying when he reached Mr. Sparrow's shop. He looked through the window but there was no sign of Harriet so he went in.

Mr. Sparrow came out of the back room to greet him.

"Good evening, sir," David said. "I really came round to see Harriet. Is she in?"

"She is. She is, I hope, getting our supper, for I shall close down in half an hour. You may go up and see her if you like. I am pleased for my Harry to make new friends but they must realize that she is not always free to go out with them."

So David went up and on the first landing shouted, "Where are you, Harry? It's me. David."

A door opened and there was Harriet, flushed and excited and wearing an apron several sizes too large for her.

"David!" she gasped. "Have you come to see me? How wonderful. I've been thinking about you all and wondering what was happening. Will you come into the kitchen 'cos I'm getting our supper but it isn't very much really. It's cold meat and chutney, but he likes potatoes baked in their jackets whatever else he has. Have you come through the shop? Why have you come to see me? How are the others? How's Jon? Do come in and talk to me."

David followed her into the tiny gleaming kitchen which seemed to have many more labour-saving gadgets in it than their own and sat on the edge of the table.

"Your grandfather said I could come up. I've come to ask you to do something very important for us, Harriet."

"Oh, I will, David. Anything I can. I love doing things for you. Just tell me. I'll do anything as long as it doesn't upset Grandpa 'cos he's so kind to me."

"I'm sure he is, Harry. We don't want you to do anything which isn't right, but we think we're on the way to solving a terrific mystery and you can really help us."

"Could I really? Just tell me, David."

"You remember that little man who called in to the shop and wanted to buy those old magazines the twins brought round?"

"Of course I do. We believe his name is Phillips and he gave Grandpa an address in Holloway Hill and told him to write there if he wanted some special pictures - I forget what they were... That's the man, isn't it, David?"

"That's the chap. You'd know him again, wouldn't you? Pale-faced, slim and dark. Oily sort of hair."

"I didn't see his hair. I'd know him, I think. He's never come back for the old papers Dickie and Mary left."

"Good. I haven't got time to tell you about this now, Harry, but we believe that this chap - we know that Phillips isn't his real name because we've met him before - is doing something very dishonest and it's all to do with shops like your grandfather's. What we're trusting you to do for us, Harry, is to keep a good look-out for this man in particular because we think he'll come back to this shop soon. We want to know all about him, and you're in on this with us. We want to know where he comes from and where he's going, and we want to know whether he offers to sell your grandfather any old pictures or prints... You remember, don't you, that he told Mr. Sparrow that if he wanted any old pictures he was to write to him at that address at Holloway Hill? That's the sort of thing we want to know, Harry, and that's how you can help us. We want to know too whether anyone else comes in and asks for those old magazines - and I s'pose we want to know if anybody else comes along and wants to sell any."

Harriet, now sitting at the kitchen table, was gazing at him wide-eyed with excitement.

"But why, David? Why? Can't you tell me? It isn't fair to ask me to do all these things for you and not tell me why. I want to have adventures with you all, but I do wish some of you would come here sometimes and stay with me. I can't leave Grandpa all the time, can I?"

Suddenly David liked her very much. They weren't being really fair to her and he was sure that she would do anything she could to help them. He smiled and came round to her side of the table and sat on the edge next to her.

"Of course I'll tell you, Harry. It's only that everything has happened so quickly since we met you that we never seem to have had time."

David told her as quickly as he could about Wilson and of how they had met him again the other day, and how they wanted to help him to get his exciting story about the Johnson flower prints. He did not tell her anything about the Lone Pine Club because that was not his own secret, but he could see that she was becoming more and more excited as he talked.

"So you do see, Harry, that we must keep Wilson's secret. We haven't said anything about it at home and you mustn't tell Mr. Sparrow. Tomorrow we'll try to arrange for one of us to share a watch with you here, but the chap we want is Grandon, who gave your grandfather the name of Phillips and the address of that disgusting little shop where letters may be left at 79, Holloway Hill. You would know him again, wouldn't you?"

"I've told you that I shall know him, David. I'll help you, but suppose I do see him in the shop or about here? What am I to do? Tell you? Watch him? Follow him or what?"

"When one of us is with you it will be easier. One can follow and the other keep in touch with us. What we want to know, Harry, is where Grandon lives and who he meets. He always seems to be running away because he recognizes us. He doesn't know you. He's only seen you once and he wouldn't be suspicious of you."

"You think he lives near here then?"

"It looks like it. He came back this way in the fog. He called here and spoke to your grandfather about flower prints. He came again and wanted to buy the old papers and he chose Holloway Hill as an address for letters... I must go now, Harriet, but we'll see you tomorrow. Keep our secret for us and help us to help Wilson. We told him about you, of course... Thanks a lot, Harry. It's grand to know that you're helping us. Cheerio!"

She went to the top of the stairs and watched him go down into the shop. She heard him say "Good night" to her grandfather and then she called to the old man,

"How long, Grandpa? Shall I make the tea?"

"Ten minutes, my dear."

She lit the gas under the kettle and then went to the top of the stairs again. Mr. Sparrow had a customer for she could hear the murmur of their voices. Then, just as she whispered, "Bother!" she heard a man say,

"I have been in before, Mr. Sparrow, but perhaps you have forgotten. There is now a very marked demand for these Johnson's flower prints and if you have an enquiry I can supply you-----"

She caught her breath and crept down three more stairs so that she could see into the shop. The man standing there with his hands in the pockets of his belted coat and wearing a check cap was Grandon, without a doubt, and David had missed him by only five minutes.

Surely this was her chance? Harriet's heart was thumping with excitement as she made up her mind. She turned the gas low under the kettle, put on her coat, scarf and gloves and then scribbled a message on a pad which her grandfather kept on the mantelpiece.

Have had to go out quickly. Don't worry. May have to go on to Brownlow Square. Potatoes in oven. Don't wait for me. Love, Harry.

And then, before she had time to change her mind, she ran down the other stairs and let herself out of the front door, hoping that Grandon had not yet left the shop.

She stood for a moment in the shadows on the step. It was dark but clear. The street lamps spilled pools of light on the frost-spangled pavements and her breath puffed like smoke as she waited for the closing of the shop door to warn her that Grandon had finished talking to her grandfather. It would have been possible for him to have left while she was getting her coat and running downstairs but she had to take that risk. She was so excited at the idea of being able to help the others so soon after being asked, that she forgot that Mr. Sparrow might be worried and angry about the note she had left for him.

Then she heard the shop door close and shrank back into the shadows, wondering whether the footsteps she could now hear would come towards her or go the other way. She breathed a sigh of relief as they receded and then ran out on to the pavement. In the light of the street lamp she saw a slim man in a belted coat and cap walking down the street. She was sure it was Grandon, so she crossed the road and hurried after him on the other pavement.

He stopped outside the *Saracen's Head* and joined a queue for buses going to the West End. The bus arrived and she followed him upstairs to the top deck and sat two seats behind him. Then she realized that she must know where he was getting off before she asked for her own ticket and so, feeling almost sick with excitement she moved forward and sat next to him on the other side of the gangway. Harriet tried not to watch him too obviously but there was something about him that made her afraid. She tried in her mind to put this feeling into words - words which she would use when she was proudly telling the others about her adventure. Shabby and mean and grubby were the words she thought of. He was dirty, too, with fingers stained brown with his horrid little cigars.

Then the conductor came up and she counted twelve shillings in her purse. She looked out of the window as the man came along the bus hoping that he would ask Grandon first. He did, and she heard him say, "Hyde Park Corner" and so she asked for the same, and then clasped her hands in her lap and stared ahead thinking to herself, "This is really happening to me. Just because a boy got lost in the fog and knocked at our door, I'm in the middle of this terrific adventure. I've made wonderful new friends and now I'm following a man who's got something to do with something very wrong and I'm helping a man I've never met to get a story in the evening paper..."

And so her thoughts ran ahead of what was happening and it was odd that, not until they reached Hyde Park Corner and Grandon pushed past the woman sitting next to him, did Harriet even wonder where she was going to be led now. She had been past Hyde Park Corner in a bus before, but it was not a part of London which she knew.

She hurried down the steep stairs to the pavement and saw Grandon a few yards ahead pushing through the crowds round the entrance to the

Underground. She squirmed her way after him praying that he would not go into the station. He did not, and she managed to keep quite close to him and crossed the wide street at the traffic lights a few yards behind him.

Following him here was much more difficult than in the streets she knew near home. There was more traffic and the pavements were thick with people.

Soon he turned into a narrower, less crowded street and she followed more cautiously because if he turned round now it was possible that he might remember seeing her on the bus. She took off her head-scarf and crammed it in her pocket in case he had noticed it, and crossed to the other pavement

At last Grandon turned into a dark and narrow street flanked on each side by the backs of high houses. As she followed him cautiously round the corner, fearing that in so quiet a backwater he might hear her footsteps, she was suddenly afraid that he might be waiting for her. Never once had he looked over his shoulder, but surely, if he was up to no good, he would be suspicious of steps behind him in these quiet streets.

She stopped and held her breath. Twenty yards ahead on the same side of the road on which she was standing, an old-fashioned street lamp shed a circle of pale yellow light on the dark pavement.

Grandon had vanished. There was no sound but the desperate thudding of her heart. She was alone in the narrow street.

But of course he couldn't *really* vanish and unless she hurried to see where he could have gone, she would have failed her friends just when she wanted so desperately to be worthy of their trust. She was now very frightened, so it was particularly brave of her to run towards the street's lamp not knowing what she was going to find.

She found the gloomy entrance, under an archway, to a cobbled yard. Another dim light at the end of the yard showed her a lock-up garage. It was in fact, although she did not know it, an old mews very much like that in which James Wilson lived some miles away.

She stood listening for a moment under the archway believing that Grandon must have come in here, but she could hear nothing except a faint scrape and clink of metal. She was very tempted to go back to the corner of the street, look for its name, and then find the nearest telephone box and ring up the others at Brownlow Square. Surely she had run their quarry to earth at last? Then she heard the clink again and she stepped forward. The courtyard was larger than she had thought and on her left was an alley between the backs of high houses. Something made her look up and there, although she could hardly believe her eyes, she saw in the dim light the shadowy figure of a man climbing up an iron ladder. Even as she watched she saw him clamber over a low parapet to a flat roof and disappear. She had really run him to earth!

After a last glance up to the roof-tops she turned and ran back under the archway just as a big car, with blinding headlights, swung into it from the street. With a scream of fear she jumped sideways and pressed herself back against the wall. The wing of the car missed her by inches as it braked to a standstill. Then the window nearest Harriet was lowered and in the dim light from the lamp on the pavement the frightened girl saw the face of a smart woman with blue-rinsed hair and heavy blue-rimmed spectacles staring at her.

"Who are you, child?" she said in a surprisingly harsh voice. "What are you doing here? Come here and tell me... Come here, I say."

In sudden panic Harriet edged along the wall until she was past the car, and raced blindly out in to the street.

8. Another Clue

Penny woke late the next morning. Nothing very exciting had happened on her return, the evening before, from her expedition with Judith to Boscombe Street. It was not until after they had gone up to bed that she had been able to tell the others that she and Judith had discovered that the old papers which Slinky had been keen to buy were being used to paste over the backs of the faked flower prints. David had come in from his visit to Harriet just before supper, and after that, when the twins had gone to bed, Mr. Morton had suggested a game of Monopoly, which went on for a long time. As they went upstairs after bidding the grown-ups good night, Jon had said, "Come into our room for a sec, Penny. We want to hear what happened to you, and David has got news too. We'll tell the twins in the morning. They'll be asleep now."

He was right. They were - but on the boys' beds and they woke as soon as David switched on the light.

"We knew you'd talk all this over without us," Mary yawned. "We just decided to wait for you and here we are. Hullo, Penny. Please tell us what happened to you?"

So Penny had wasted no time in telling her story, adding that she had not seen Wilson again, but had left Judith to tell him of their discovery.

"It's working out well," David had said excitedly. "I told Harriet we're relying on her to watch for Slinky in the shop, and tomorrow morning we'll arrange with the twins to patrol this area until we see him again. Now we'd better go to bed, because there'll be plenty to do tomorrow."

So the twins, sleepy but excited, had been sent off to their own rooms and Penny, in hers, had stayed awake for a while, thinking how strange it was that they should be thrown again into an adventure with unpleasant people none of whom they had ever wanted to hear of again.

Then she slept, and was dreaming of Slinky Grandon as she remembered him at the *Gay Dolphin* when Mrs. Morton came in, drew the curtains, sat on the bed and pushed gentle fingers through her red curls.

"Wake up, Penelope Redhead," she smiled. "What is it Jon calls you? Newpenny? Very clever of him. Wake up, darling... Can't think what's the matter with you all this morning - although the twins are getting up now. Mr. Morton and I had breakfast together and he's gone off to work. I am going shopping in ten minutes. The coffee is on and all you lazybones will have to get your own breakfast. Don't be long. I'll wake the boys."

Mrs. Morton always meant what she said and she left them to look after themselves. As soon as they were all round the breakfast table David announced: "We've got to get busy now. I promised Harriet that one or two of us would go round as soon as we could this morning. We can't expect her to act as sentry in the shop by herself all the time. I asked Mr. Sparrow last night whether anyone had enquired for Johnson's flower prints and thought he was rather touchy about it. I told Harriet that she mustn't tell him anything about our side of the story until we've asked James... Don't take all the sugar, Dickie... And why are you fidgeting about like that? Is the seat hot?"

Dickie took a final spoonful of brown sugar and pushed the bowl across to his brother.

"Acksherley the seat is *not* hot, thank you, but I am sitting on important news... Just before Mum went out I heard something go plop on the door mat an' I rushed down and have rescued for you a top secret dokkerment." Proudly he produced a large and grubby envelope and passed it across the table.

"Aksherley," Mary said, through a mouthful of corn-flakes, "we haven't opened it but we think it's from Harriet... Please read it to us, David."

"How long have you had this?" David started indignantly, and then realizing that perhaps the twins had been sensible in hiding it, grinned and said, "Thanks. It's got my name on it and it says 'Top Secret and Immediate Delivery'." He slit the envelope, pulled out some folded foolscap paper and

looked at the last sheet. "You're right. It is from Harriet. It's to us all. I'll read it.

"Dear David and all. I am writing this in bed and it is very late, but it is vital news I have for you and as Grandpa has told me that he is going out after breakfast, I have to look after the shop. But do not worry I shall deliver this dispatch because I have great news. Grandon came into the shop just after you had gone last night. He didn't see me so I left a note for Grandpa and followed him. Grandon, I mean. He got on a bus at the 'Saracen' and so did I and he didn't know me and we got off at Hyde Park Corner. After that he went down all sorts of streets getting darker and lonelier, but he didn't see me because I was very cunning and presently he went down a darker street and-"

David paused for breath and turned over the page. "Quite a girl is our Harriet," Jon remarked. "Go on, David."

"... Went down a darker street" David read on, "and suddenly vanished. I was frightened but went a little way down the street and I saw a dark yard under an archway, where they keep cars. That's where he went. He wasn't there when I went under the arch. I didn't know what to do until I heard a little noise and then I looked up and saw him climbing up an iron ladder on to a flat roof. I am sure it was Grandon because of his cap. When I was coming out of the yard a big car coming in nearly knocked me down. A horrid woman in the car shouted at me. I hated her and ran off as fast as I could. I don't know where I went after that but I ran and ran until I found a telephone box but I only had four pennies so I rang up Grandpa instead of you. I said I would be home soon and he wasn't to worry. Then I saw a woman and she told me where to go to get a bus and I was very unhappy when I got home because I hate not telling Grandpa everything and I couldn't tell him a lie but he thought I was with you all the time.

"Anyway you can see that I have done what you asked me, and as Grandpa will be out all the morning will you please call round and see me, and when he comes back before dinner please ask him if I can spend the rest of the day with you... That's all, David. I'll bring this round at breakfast time before Grandpa goes out. PLEASE come and see me soon.

"Your friend,

"Harriet."

They all stared at David as he put down the last sheet, and then Penny, with very pink cheeks, said indignantly, "Well, David, I hope you're satisfied with what you've done. Fancy working Harriet up to such a state that she had to go through all that by herself. The beastly thing is that poor Harriet kept her promise to you and didn't tell Mr. Sparrow where she'd been."

"All right, Penny," Jon broke in. "No need to get so worked up. We all like Harriet. She's grand and so is what she's found out, but how could David know that Slinky was going to walk into the shop as soon as he'd gone out? Of course we shall have to explain to Mr. Sparrow, but what we've got to do now is let James know what's happened. Do you agree, David?"

"Of course. Sorry about Harriet, Penny. I see what you mean about making her promise not to tell her grandfather. If she had though, he would never have let her go and we'd be no better off."

"We're not all that better off," Penny said grimly. "She doesn't seem to know where she went. All she remembers is Hyde Park Comer and I don't blame her either. I should have been scared to follow Slinky along unknown dark streets, and then be nearly run down... What do we do now?"

"We'll go and help Harriet," Mary said. "We won't desert her. We think she's jolly brave. One of you can telephone us there and if we're not in you can telephone here, 'cos we'll have brought Harriet back with us."

David nodded. "That's all right, but as Harry has to stay in the shop you two mustn't follow Slinky on your own if you see him. Stay with Harry. We've got enough news now for James and he must decide what to do... I'll ring him up now."

He went out into the hall while the twins bolted the rest of their breakfast, muttering to each other about "top secret dispatches" and "defending Harriet to the death." Jon never hurried his meals and looked up at Penny

with amusement when she jumped from her chair and walked up and down the room.

"Why doesn't David hurry?" she stormed. "James must be somewhere. If he isn't at Rosemary Court he'll be at the *Clarion*. Somebody must know where he is. He can't just disappear. Why didn't David let me telephone? I'd have made somebody answer. Journalists have to be where they can be found."

"Don't be an idiot, Newpenny. He may have been sent out on another job. Calm down."

"Of course you *would* think of something ridiculously *sensible* like that. It's only that David is so slow... Oh. Here you are, David. What does he say?"

"I don't know. There's no answer from the flat and when I got on to the paper somebody just said he was out on a job and they didn't know when he would be back... There's only one thing to do. We'll go down to Fleet Street and wait at the *Clarion* until he does come. He's got to know what we've found out and especially about Grandon offering to sell Mr. Sparrow flower pictures and Harriet following him and seeing him climbing up a ladder... Why do you think he'd want to climb on to a roof somewhere not far from Hyde Park Corner?"

Nobody answered the last question because the twins ran for the door just as Jon finished his coffee and shouted, "Hi, you two. Just give a hand clearing and washing up. We can't leave this for Mrs. Morton." Then to David he went on, "I s'pose she really *did* see him climbing up a ladder? I mean, she may have thought she did, but it doesn't make sense to me. It would be easier to believe if she'd seen someone climbing *down* a ladder because there might have been a fire. See what I mean?"

Penny stormed at him. "I think boys can be absolutely revolting... There's Harriet all alone and being loyal to us and brave too, and p'raps upsetting her grandfather and then sitting up in bed writing out all that report, and you as good as say she's making it up. What's the matter with you two this morning? Why shouldn't Slinky climb up a ladder? Or jump off it? He always did things that nobody expected and I know Harriet isn't making up her story. S'pose she turned round and accused one of us of making it all up

just to tell a good story? S'pose she did just that? You two boys would look sillier than you're looking at this minute... Come on, twins. Help me stack these breakfast things."

Jon and David stood side by side and could think of nothing to say. Then Mary giggled and Penny's bad humour vanished as quickly as it had come.

"Oh well," she laughed, "I forgive you both, but don't be unfair to Harriet again."

Jon polished his spectacles, winked at David and then took the tray from Penny. A quarter of an hour later they all left the house, the twins and Macbeth going down to Mr. Sparrow's and the other three headed for a bus which would take them to Fleet Street.

The building in which the *Clarion* was edited and printed was not very impressive. As they stood on the steps wondering whether they should all go in together they could feel the building shake as the mighty printing presses in the basement began to churn out the Lunch Edition. A pleasant-looking young man suddenly shot out of the swing doors as he struggled into a tweed coat and nearly knocked them over.

"Sorry," he began, and then realizing that these three were not usual visitors, he paused and looked admiringly at Penny.

"What's all this about?" he grinned. "Outing?"

Penny flushed. She was not amused.

"Do you know Mr. James Wilson? We want to see him urgently."

"How urgently? He's out. Is it personal, or can I help?"

"Afraid not, thanks all the same," David said quickly with one eye on Penny who was in a fighting mood. "May we leave him a message?"

"Of course. Ask the porter inside for a piece of paper - we've got plenty to spare in this place. Cheerio."

"Good morning," Penny said coldly, and proceeded with all the dignity of which she was capable up the steps. The boys followed. The rumble of the machines was louder and there was a sharp smell of printers' ink. Opposite the door was a big lift and on their right a window marked "All Enquiries." A grizzled commissionaire with a row of medal ribbons on his tunic was sitting behind it.

As Penny opened her mouth to speak one of four telephones on his desk jangled.

"Hall door," he said into the receiver. "No, sir. No. Never heard of him," and rang off. "Now, miss." Another telephone jangled but he took no notice of it. "Come on, miss. Who do you want?"

Penny explained breathlessly. She was longing for him to answer the insistent telephone.

"Mr. Wilson? 'Course I know him. I'll ask the News Room," and he dialled a number on yet another telephone. "Sorry, miss. He's out... Yes, I'll give a message. Want to write it? O.K. Come in. You two as well... BOY! Waiting room!"

A pimply youth shot out of "Enquiries," gave Penny a saucy look and pushed open the door of an ugly room furnished with an enormous table in the centre of which was a big glass ash-tray.

"May we have some paper and an envelope, please?" David asked in an attempt to regain control of the situation, and the boy was so surprised that he brought some at once and handed it to Penny. He was inclined to linger but Jon stared him out of the room.

"Wonderful, Penny!" David said grimly as he grabbed the pad of paper. "I'll write it, thanks, but you can address the envelope. James will love to see your writing."

"You boys are a little dull this morning," she smiled. "What are you going to say?" David wrote quickly and then read aloud:

"Dear James. We've got very urgent and important news and are waiting in Fleet Street for you. Penny and Jon have come with me specially, and one or more of us will be waiting for you in the Kardomah Cafe at the bottom of Fetter Lane. We really are on to something so please come as soon as you have read this. We telephoned your flat and your office this morning and now we've come down specially. Please hurry."

"David."

"That's all right," Jon agreed and Penny added, "You can address the envelope too. That was clever of you about the cafe, David. I didn't see it... Come on. Let's go and find it."

They left the note with the commissionaire who promised to give it to Wilson as soon as he came in. It was not far to the cafe and there David said, "We'll take turns in here. No sense in all three drinking coffee all the time. You two go off and explore for half an hour. Even if James comes, I'll wait for you."

"There's something sinister about this, I'm sure," Penny said. "I suppose you're hungry, David. Maybe we rushed your breakfast...? All right. We'll be back in half an hour, I promise. Jon looks so thrilled to be exploring with me, doesn't he?"

Jon was used to this sort of banter and took no notice as they walked down the crowded pavement towards Ludgate Circus. Her mood changed as quickly as usual.

"Glad we don't live here, Jon. Too much London gives me a headache. I hope James comes soon. I almost wish you'd never been to that stupid football match in the fog - none of this would have happened then and there are things about it that I don't like."

Jon knew what she meant. He couldn't forget Holloway Hill.

"We'll soon get it fixed up," he replied. "Wilson will be pleased with what we've got to tell him... Let's get out of these crowds."

They turned up a narrow passage past the famous old tavern called the *Cheshire Cheese* and were surprised to find several quiet and narrow streets within a few hundred yards of the roar of Fleet Street. By chance they turned into Bellfields Street.

"What made us come this way?" Penny asked. "Here's another antique shop. We can't get away from James' mystery. Let's go in and ask for flower prints, Jon. It's our duty."

They went in. From the gloom at the back of the shop stepped Mr. Harry Hartman looking very distinguished in his sombre clothes, pearl tie pin and neat little beard. He greeted them without enthusiasm. They didn't look like customers. Penny smiled, "Good morning," and then nudged Jon who understood this to mean that he was to start the conversation. He could be very pleasant when he wanted to be, and Mr. Hartman was surprised when he recognized and named a beautiful fruit dish.

"I thought it must be Rockingham," Jon said. "My mother has two pieces. They're beautiful. I want to make her a present and wondered if you've got any of those flower pictures everyone is talking about. By a man called Johnson, I believe."

Mr. Hartman managed to hide his surprise.

"My dear young sir, of course I know Johnson's exquisite work, but I doubt if you could afford to buy one even if I had one to sell you. The price would probably be one hundred guineas."

Penny produced what she hoped was a gay but sophisticated laugh.

"That does sound a lot of money, Mr. Hartman, but how exciting to be able to buy and sell beautiful things like those pictures. I wish we could afford one. My aunt has an hotel in Sussex, and a Johnson's flower picture would be just what she would love, wouldn't it, Jon?"

Jon agreed and Mr. Hartman looked a little bewildered.

"We're on holiday in London," Penny prattled on. "We love exploring and just happened to be passing this way and saw your exciting little shop... Have you ever actually sold a Johnson's print, Mr. Hartman?"

"Yes I have. Quite recently. I have another ordered."

"How I wish we could see just one of them, don't you, Jon? What must be so exciting about a business like this is wondering whether everyone who comes into your shop has something rare to sell. We might have something, mightn't we?"

Mr. Hartman smiled and moved tactfully towards the door. These youngsters were wasting his time.

"I don't think you have, miss, but we do occasionally have some surprises... Good morning."

"Oh dear. I'm afraid we're wasting your time. Do tell us before we go, Mr. Hartman, where you got your Johnson's print? I mean, was it just luck and brought in by someone you'd never seen before, or did you sort of hear about it?"

Mr. Hartman gave her a sharp look, opened the door and inclined his head in a little bow as she stepped out.

"Oh dear," she smiled. "I'm afraid we've offended you. It's just that we're interested in this sort of thing."

The door closed behind them.

"Nice work, Penny. A stroke of luck for us. He knows something about Johnsons and what shook him was your question about where he got his. Did you notice that he admitted he'd got another on order? So did I. Rum little chap. But you never know. He might be another Slinky."

"Impossible. There's only one of him. Why are we hurrying and where are we going?"

"Back to the Kardomah in the hope that Wilson is there by now."

They were both rather breathless as they went into the cafe and saw Wilson and David with their heads together over a table. They got up when they saw Penny.

"You look as if you've got some news too," Wilson said, when he had ordered more coffee for them. "Thanks for coming down and leaving that note for me, and thanks for all you're doing. David has told me about Harriet."

"Don't mention it," Penny said. "There's one thing you've got to understand though, James. You can't order Harriet about. She has to stay at the shop this morning until Mr. Sparrow comes back, and I don't think we ought to persuade her to do anything for us unless her grandfather knows all about it."

"Of course," Wilson agreed. "We'll tell him. We've got to plan quickly now."

"Something else you'd better know," Jon said, and told him of Mr. Hartman and his admission about Johnson's flower prints. "He said he'd got another on order and he didn't like us asking questions. I think you ought to see him - he's quite near."

Wilson ran his fingers through his hair in excitement.

"Wait here, please. I won't be long. I've got important telephoning to do... Don't go away."

"We've got him excited now," Penny said as Wilson dashed out into Fleet Street. "I hope he isn't too long because he's forgotten to pay the bill... Not really our business, David, but I think it's time you told your parents about what's going on... I've got a hunch that something exciting is about to happen to us and I think they ought to be warned."

As the cafe was filling up Jon ordered some more coffee so that they could stay at the table, but when Wilson dashed in again they soon forgot what was left in their cups.

"I've got everything fixed," he said. "I've 'phoned the paper and I've got a free hand to deal with this forged picture story. I've been on to Judith too, because she's been in all this with me from the beginning. She's got a grand old warrior of a car and I've asked her to go as soon as she can to Sparrow's shop. I want Jon and David to go back there right away by bus and Penny and I will follow on as soon as we can. We'll all meet there, but I want to have a word with Mr. Hartman first and see what he's up to. He may be the link we're seeking. You boys have got the big job. You've got to wheedle Harriet and make her remember where she went last night. *She's got to find that cobbled mews where she saw a man climbing up the roof...* Will you two boys go right away?"

"Suppose Mr. Sparrow is there? How much shall we tell him?" David asked.

"As much as you think he'll take, but say I'm on the way with a story about the flower prints and will tell him everything. Penny and I will come on as soon as we've had words with Mr. Hartman... O.K.?"

Jon nodded. "Good enough. Come on, David. See you soon."

Wilson fumbled through his pockets for money to pay his bill. Then, "Come on, Redhead. I like those two boy friends of yours. When you've made up your mind, be sure to ask Judith and me to the wedding."

Penny laughed. "Ask us to your wedding first. We'll liven it up for you," and when they reached Bellfields Street she asked him whether she should come in with him.

"Don't see why not. I'm going to tell him who I am and what we suspect. The risk, of course, is that he might be a crook and will warn the others as soon as we're out of the place. What did you think of him? What does feminine intuition suggest?"

Penny tried to look specially intelligent and feminine.

"I should think he's a very proud little man and very smart in business. I'm sure he was suspicious of us, and I don't believe he liked our question about

where he got the Johnson... It's difficult to say but I don't think Jon or I felt he was one of a Ballinger gang... Here we are."

Wilson opened the door for her and once again Harry Hartman came forward to greet her from the shadows at the back of the shop. He frowned, when he recognized her, but before he could speak, Wilson introduced himself and passed Mr. Hartman his card. "Miss Warrender, whom you have already met this morning, is a friend of mine. She tells me that you have recently done some business with Johnson's flower prints and that is why I have come at once to see you. The *Clarion* is interested in these too and we are sure that you can help us. It is probable that the police will soon be even more interested than we are. May we discuss this in your office?"

Mr. Hartman changed colour, but he looked more angry than guilty.

"I do not see why I should help the *Clarion* more than the police but please come this way... *and* the intelligent young lady, I suppose," and he led them into his office behind the shop.

Wilson then told him that more and more evidence daily suggested that some, at least, of the Johnson's flower prints coming on to the market were forgeries. Hartman doubted the possibility of this but his denial did not suggest guilt. Under pressure he admitted that he had bought a second print from the same source as the first only this morning before Penny and Jon had come in, and that he had already notified his customer that the second was waiting delivery.

"Will you show it us, please, Mr. Hartman? I would like your advice on it, but it's possible that I can prove that there is something wrong in the colouring," Wilson asked.

Mr. Hartman was not feeling very well. When he was anxious his indigestion played unhappy tricks with him and he was certainly worried now. He unlocked a large safe and produced a framed "Johnson" of poppies and handed it to Wilson.

"Your magnifying glass would help, sir," the latter suggested and stepped over to the window. "I'm told by my fiancée who is an artist that the black

outline of the drawing is probably traced but that the colours are modern and not those which Johnson would have used. Look for yourself..."

Mr. Hartman put down his magnifying glass and sat down sadly at his desk.

"I think you may be right, Mr. Wilson. It is possible that I have lost £150, for that is what I have paid for the two prints together with my profit on the first for, of course, I cannot take money that was paid over in good faith."

When he heard this Wilson smiled at Penny and then put his hand on the old man's knee. He was sure now that Harry Hartman was honest.

"Don't worry too much about that side of it, Mr. Hartman. My paper wants this exclusive story and they'll pay for it. Help me to get this story and I'll help you... Tell me now who sold you the two prints. Was it a slim, sallow little man in a belted coat?"

"No, sir. It was a good-looking but nervous young woman of about twenty whose father had recently died. She is obviously in financial difficulty, saw a paragraph in a paper about Johnson's present popularity and remembered a print among her father's effects. She brought it to me. I sold it. She offered me another which she believed to be in the possession of a relative and that is the one you see before you. It is already sold."

"And the young lady's name and address?" Wilson snapped.

Hartman looked uneasy. "A Miss D. Smith. She implied that she had no permanent home at present but collected letters daily from the chief Post Office at Charing Cross."

"I bet she won't any longer," Wilson said grimly. "I don't think she'll try to sell you another. She'll be after somebody else by now and she'll be Mrs. Jones whose mother has just died and letters may be addressed to her at the Post Office, Piccadilly."

Penny was frowning as Wilson handed back the forged flower print and then got up.

"Just a sec, James. I've got an idea. Was she fair and slim and very pretty in a sort of hard way, Mr. Hartman? Taller than me by an inch or two?"

Mr. Hartman could not be sure of anything except that the girl was fair, almost shabby, and that he would know her again. They thanked him and Wilson promised to let him know everything that happened. He found out that Hartman had a flat above the shop, wrote down his telephone number and got him to promise that if Miss Smith called again he would telephone a message either to Rosemary Court or to the *Clarion*.

As soon as they were outside Wilson raced off towards Holborn looking for a taxi, and when they were on their way north to Mr. Sparrow's he asked Penny why she had been so interested in Miss Smith.

"Because I think she's the girl we always knew as Valerie. She's supposed to be Miss Ballinger's niece and you must remember her down at Rye. When we last saw her she was pretty, very smartly dressed and travelling in her own M.G."

Wilson nodded. "Of course." He was thinking hard. Telling phrases and colourful words raced through his mind as the jigsaw pieces of the story he wanted to write began to fall into place.

Judith's old car was already outside Sparrow's shop when Wilson paid off the taxi. Judith was in the driving seat and the twins and Macbeth were bouncing about in the back. Penny ran across and got into the front seat.

"Hullo! This is terrific. How's Harriet, and have the boys arrived?"

"Yes, yes. Mr. Sparrow came back ten minutes ago and David and Jon five minutes later. They're working on him now and you'd better go and help. I kept out of the way because he doesn't know me. Harriet is fine, but the twins say that she doesn't know where she went last night."

"Tell us what's happened, Penny," the twins begged as Wilson hurried into the shop. "We've been with Harriet and she told us about Slinky on the ladder but she can't remember where she went. The more we worry her the more upset she gets. Shall we go in and see her again and back her up?"

Judith thought not, so they sat in the car until Harriet came out to them and was introduced to Judith.

"I'm so excited I don't know what to do next," she told them breathlessly. "Mr. Wilson is telling Grandpa everything and asking him to help us and to let me go with you to Hyde Park Corner... He's a wonderful man, isn't he? He's so *quick*."

"He is indeed, Harriet," Judith agreed feelingly. "And here he comes. He's been quicker than usual. Where's Mr. Sparrow?"

Wilson pushed his hat to the back of his head and squeezed into the back of the car.

"Nothing like this has ever happened to me before," he confessed. "I'm on to the best story of my distinguished career and find myself surrounded by children of all ages, a fiancée in an ancient car and a delightful but angry old gentleman who is on our side and is now changing into his going-out suit... Now, listen."

He explained that Mr. Sparrow, who now knew the whole story, had promised to do all he could to help them and had entrusted Harriet to his care. He was going to close his shop for the rest of the day and go to 79, Holloway Hill himself and try to trace Slinky, while Harriet went with the others to the West End.

"What about us?" the twins interrupted. "We've got to come. We've been left out of everything so far."

"Why don't you go with Grandpa?" Harriet suggested. "You can look after each other. Take your funny little dog to guard you all. Shall I go in and ask him?"

The twins looked at each other and Mary nodded.

"All right. Ask him, Harry. We'd like that."

"Just a sec," David said. "We'll have to tell my parents about this now. James, you'd better come up to Brownlow Square and explain. Father won't be there but you can tell Mother. She knows we're up to something, but we can't let the twins go off with Mr. Sparrow to Holloway Hill unless they know at home."

Wilson agreed, so Harriet took the twins in to see her grandfather after they had promised to bring him on to Brownlow Square as soon as he was ready.

Mrs. Morton was used to surprises from her family, but she found it difficult to hide her astonishment when Judith's ancient car drew up outside her house and Penny led the procession up the steps.

Penny turned at the door and whispered to Wilson and Judith, "You'll have to win this battle for us. If she likes you both she'll let us go. But don't you upset her. She's wonderful."

In the end it was Mr. Sparrow in his "going-out" suit, accompanied by the twins and Harriet, who finally persuaded Mrs. Morton to give them a free hand. She promised to explain everything to her husband as soon as he came home, and Wilson promised to keep in touch by telephone, and at last the first expedition was ready to start. Penny, Jon and David piled into the back of the car while Wilson took Harriet in the front with Judith.

The twins, Mrs. Morton and Mr. Sparrow waved to them from the steps as they set off.

"Now, my dear," Wilson said to Harriet as she stared, white-faced, through the windscreen. "Everything depends on what you can remember. All you've got to do when we get to Hyde Park Corner is to tell Judith which way to drive. Don't worry. You'll remember when you get there."

Harriet suddenly put her hands to her face and sobbed. "But I *can't* remember, I tell you. I've tried and tried but I don't know where it was. You keep worrying me, but what happened last night is getting like a dream. It doesn't seem real any more... Why don't you all let me alone?"

9. Mr. Sparrow in Action

As soon as the car party had left Brownlow Square, Mr. Sparrow turned to Mrs. Morton, who was standing beside him on the steps of No. 7.

"I can only hope, madam, that you are not as bewildered by these events as I am. Mr. Wilson is a very quick-thinking and enthusiastic young man, but I am sure he is right in his suspicions about these flower prints. I am not yet entirely clear as to how all these enterprising children have become involved, but if you will entrust Richard and Mary to me for an hour or so I shall be glad of their company and help."

The twins looked up beseechingly at their mother, and Macbeth looked at her too with his head on one side and with gently waving tail.

"Of course I can trust you with Mr. Sparrow, but what am I to tell your father when he comes home?"

"Tell him, madam, that we hope by the time he returns to have, between us, checked what may be a criminal plot to dispose of forged pictures through honest dealers like myself. I want to trace the man who is trying to sell me faked pictures. I am sure you will understand, Mrs. Morton, that I am particularly anxious to find the man who is not only prepared to swindle me but also to tarnish my reputation as an honest dealer." And with this magnificent, final phrase he took off his hat and bowed to her.

Mrs. Morton tried not to smile.

"We shall be delighted to be of service to you, Mr. Sparrow, but please do not keep the twins out too long. I am anxious for them to be back before their father comes home... Be off with you, twins, and take care of Mr. Sparrow."

It took them nearly three-quarters of an hour to reach Holloway Hill for, in spite of his knowledge of north London, Mr. Sparrow had difficulty in

finding it. The twins, although anxious to help, did not seem to have a sense of direction any better than Harriet's.

"We'll just have to keep on asking people," Mary suggested. "We never mind asking people anything, Mr. Sparrow. We're not shy."

Dickie skipped round to the outside of the pavement so that Mr. Sparrow was walking between them.

"We ought to have told you before that as a family we're jolly good at adventures. You can always trust us and really you're jolly lucky to have us living so near you... Of course, we're lucky too to have such a super shop with a 'Bluebells of Scotland' musical box so close."

"Do you think we're going the right way?" asked Mary. "It's not fair to expect Mackie to guide us because he's only been this way once and doesn't know where we're going... Yes, this is right, I'm sure. I remember that chemist's shop with the big green and red jars."

"There's a policeman over there," Dickie said. "Let's ask him. He ought to know things. Will you ask the policeman, Mr. Sparrow, or shall we?"

Mr. Sparrow found his breath in time to make sure that the twins didn't have a chance to disturb the metropolitan police while on duty.

"Wait here," he said. "Keep the dog with you. I am sure we are near Holloway Hill now, but I will make sure."

Mr. Sparrow, in his old-fashioned "going-out" suit, was an unusual looking man and when the policeman noticed the twins waiting on the pavement he made no attempt to hide his astonishment that such an oddly assorted trio should want Holloway Hill. But they were only five minutes away from the shabby street which the twins had hoped they would never see again.

Mr. Sparrow didn't like the look of it.

"You should have told me it was like this," he protested. "Where is Number Seventy-nine?"

"It's a newspaper shop opposite a café at the top of the hill," Mary said. "We know it doesn't look very nice but that's the address that Slinky wrote down for you, isn't it?"

"That is true," he agreed. "Here it is and I shall demand to see him or get his true address... Now answer me, Richard and Mary. I do not want you to come into this shop. Will you stay here till I return?"

"You promised to look after us," Dickie said. "We've been here before. We're not really afraid with Mackie to guard us and you will be quite near. If we stay here at the bottom of the street we shan't be able to help you. It wouldn't be a good idea for Slinky to see us with you. He'll remember us if he sees us together. He's met us before and he hates us and we don't like him much either."

"We've got a good idea," Mary said suddenly. "We'll come up the hill with you and sit in that café opposite while you're in the shop. There are tables right in the window so we can spy easily, but it's a pity that we can't be disguised."

"We will see what the cafe is like, Mary. I agree that it would be wiser for you not to come into the shop with me... Forward then, into the enemy's camp."

Dickie nodded his approval. He liked that sort of talk.

When they were near the top of the hill Dickie said, "There's the shop, Mr. Sparrow. We don't like it and the man inside is fat and white. I don't think the café is very nice either, but if you will give us some money we'll have a cup of tea or something and watch through the window. We shan't be afraid. We'll have Mackie with us and nobody can hurt us - not even Slinky if he comes. He's afraid of us."

Mr. Sparrow looked doubtful, but if Grandon was actually living over the shop and was in, he was determined to speak to him. After all, these two children were only across the street. He was sure that Grandon would be more likely to talk if he did not see the twins.

"Very well," he said. "I hope not to be long. Here is half-a-crown. All you have to do is to keep a careful watch for this man and wait quietly for me. Do not come into the shop."

The twins nodded, peered through the steamy glass of the cafe door and went in, dragging a reluctant little dog on a tartan lead with them. If Mr. Sparrow had known them better he would have tried to extract a promise that under no circumstances were they to leave the cafe until he came for them. He would have been a happier man during the next few hours if he had done this. He watched them speak to a large woman at the back of the cafe and then carry two bottles of pink minerals and two glasses over to a table in the window. They waved cheerfully, so he crossed the road, glanced at the fly-blown rubbish in the window of the newspaper shop and went in.

A door at the back of the shop opened and a fat mountain of a man came in silently. Dickie's description of him had been apt. He seemed to fill the shop as he switched on a light and looked steadily, with beady eyes, at his visitor.

"Well, guv'nor," he said quietly. "Wot kin I do fer yer?"

Mr. Sparrow cleared his throat and spoke very precisely.

"I have called to see a Mr. Phillips who left this address with me a few days ago."

"No Mr. Phillips lives 'ere, guv'nor. You got it wrong." Mr. Sparrow sniffed distastefully and produced Grandon's note from his pocket.

"Here, in Mr. Phillips' own writing, is this address. He asked me to get into touch with him if I wanted his help. I do, and am prepared to pay for it. He would not be likely to write down 79, Holloway Hill if he didn't mean it... Please do not waste my time."

The fat man extended a grimy, flabby hand and took the paper. As he did so, Mr. Sparrow became aware that somebody or something was darkening the shop window, but he did not take his eyes from the fat man's face.

"I said no Mr. Phillips lives 'ere and no more 'e don't," he whispered. "If yer wants to write to 'im I'll sees 'e gits the letter. What's 'e like anyway? 'Ow do I know yer knows 'im? 'Ow do I know what you come 'ere for?"

At that moment the shop door opened behind him and he saw a gleam of recognition in the fat man's eyes. He turned quickly and, to his amazement, recognized the slim man in belted coat and check cap. He stood with one hand on the door handle while between his lips smouldered a little rank, black cigar.

Mr. Sparrow realized that his heart was thumping uncomfortably and hoped that his voice didn't shake as he said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Phillips. This is a very fortunate meeting as I was just enquiring about you. You will remember that you gave me this address when you were in my shop a few days ago... My name is Sparrow, and I want to do business with you."

Grandon's hand dropped from the door handle.

"Mr. Sparrow, eh? I didn't say *call* here, Mr. Sparrow. I said to write. Maybe you'd like me to call at your shop later this evening or tomorrow morning. I don't *live* here, Mr. Sparrow. I couldn't do business with you here, Mr. Sparrow. I just use this address, see? I'll come along this evening."

"That won't do at all, Mr. Phillips. I've come specially to talk urgent business with you *now*... No doubt you remember the particular matter you raised with me? Those flower-----"

"Please, please, Mr. Sparrow," Grandon almost shouted. "Not so loud, if you please."

"Nonsense, Mr. Phillips. You made me an offer the other day and I want to take it up at once. I have a customer waiting and that is why I have come here. Where can we discuss this now?"

Grandon glanced at the fat man and said quietly, "Give us room, Bert," and the owner of the shop grunted and then squeezed his way into the room from which he had come. Grandon moved forward and stood with his back to the window so that, in spite of the electric light, his face was in shadow.

Then he brought his hand sharply from his pocket and offered Mr. Sparrow a packet of little black cigars.

"Thank you, no," the old man said with dignity. "Let us waste no more time. The other day you offered me a Johnson's flower print. I want one at once. I have a sale if I can produce it quickly and that is why I did not write. You can still supply?"

Grandon's eyes flickered over him.

"I can supply. The subject is lilac and the price is £50."

"Very well. I have the money with me. If you have not the picture here I will come with you and collect it."

"That is not possible, Mr. Sparrow. I will bring it to your shop tomorrow morning. As soon as you open. I will be waiting for you to open."

"I will come with you now, Phillips, and collect the picture wherever it is. I will pay you £60 for it, but I must have it within the next hour or so. Where is it?"

Grandon fidgeted and refused to give a direct answer. Mr. Sparrow pressed him, asked him where he lived and whether the picture was really in his possession. Suddenly the little man lost his temper.

"I've told you a dozen times that I'll bring the picture in the morning and that's all there is to it. I don't live here and it isn't kept here. And I'd advise you, Mr. Sparrow, to hold your client until tomorrow morning, and I've had enough of your nosey questions," and with that he rushed out of the shop, slamming the door behind him. Mr. Sparrow had not expected so rapid a retreat and lost several precious seconds in following him. He was just in time to see a shabby little tradesman's van without any lettering on the doors at the back pull away from the curb outside the shop and roar away down the street.

Mr. Sparrow, feeling very much of an old fool, stood in the street and watched it disappear. He understood now how Grandon had arrived so

quickly after they had climbed the hill and what it was that had darkened the shop while he had been talking to the fat man. He had certainly succeeded in scaring him but had failed in his attempt to find out where he lived. He wondered, as he crossed the street to the cafe, what he was going to say to the twins who must have been watching his discomfiture.

They weren't there. The cafe was empty but for the woman leaning on a counter at the back of the shop and reading a newspaper. He looked round him in bewilderment. The table in the window at which he had actually seen them sitting was now bare. No bottles of pink minerals. No glasses. Nothing.

He turned to the woman and spoke with a catch of fear in his voice.

"Those two children that were here. Twins they were, with a little black dog. You saw them, didn't you? Came in about ten minutes ago."

The woman looked up.

"That's right, guv'nor. Twins they were. Real smart. Luvly manners. Nice lil' dawg, too."

"But where are they? They were to wait for me. *Where have they gone?*"

The woman was kindly enough and saw that he was worried.

"They got into that van with the dawg an' all. Soon as it drove up a little chap in a cap gets out and goes into Bert's opposite. Those two curiosities saw 'im easy enough, I reckon, for they gets up sudden and sez to me they sez, 'Excuse us, but we know that man and we're going to give him a surprise,' they sez... You'll find 'em still there like as not, young rascals... Smart they were... Real smart."

"But the van has driven off with them inside it."

"So it has an' all. Young rascals they were."

"Have you seen the van before? Do you know the driver? I must know where it has gone. Those children are in my charge."

Now the woman was worried. This might be trouble and she didn't like trouble and wasn't going to have anything to do with it.

"You ought to 'ave been with them then, guv'nor. I seen that van and that chap up there sometimes but I don't know nothing about either... Don't ask me no more questions. I've told yer all I know."

And Mr. Sparrow believed her. There was nothing more to be got here. He had failed in his trust and as he walked slowly out into the street he felt a very old and unhappy man.

As for the twins, they had acted on impulse and without even consulting each other when they saw Slinky get out of the van and hurry into the newspaper shop. Here was their big chance. Slinky was alone, and if he was just calling at 79 for letters he might well be on his way to where he did his business or to where he lived. The doors of the back of the van looked as if they might open easily and as Mr. Sparrow was still in the shop he would certainly have something to say to their enemy.

They looked at each other without speaking and then got up. Mary shortened Macbeth's lead and whispered,

"You're to be quiet, Mackie. QUIET. No fuss!"

Dickie smiled at the woman behind the counter and said, "Thank you so much. That was most refreshin'. We know that man and we're going to give him a surprise." And then, in a flash, they were out of the cafe and dashing across the street taking care to keep the van between themselves and 79. They glanced down the hill but the road was empty. Dickie nodded to his twin, who with Macbeth hid behind the van, while he edged round and tried the door handle. It turned in his hand. He opened one door and whispered hoarsely, "O.K., twin. Come on."

He scrambled inside, grabbed the dog, hauled Mary in beside him and closed the doors. The inside of the little van was dark because there was a partition, broken only by a small window, behind the driving seat.

"Down on the floor," Dickie whispered. "We'll be all right if he doesn't want to put anything inside. What's all this on the floor, twin?"

Mary, hoping that Dickie was not as frightened as she was, hugged the wriggling dog to her and whispered,

"It's long sticks of wood, Dickie. They smell of sawdust."

"So they do. I know what they are. They're the sort of wood they make picture frames of... We're on the trail, twin. We've done it again. All the others are dashing about over London but we've found out something on our own."

They had heard the sound of a slammed door and then quick footsteps across the pavement. A man scrambled into the driving seat and started the engine. With a fearful jerk and a roar the van started and rattled down the hill.

The twins were terrified as they were tossed about on the hard floor.

"I feel awful Mary," he whispered. "I feel green. I wish we could stop."

"Do you want me to stop him, twin? I don't like this much either... *Be quiet, Mackie*"

She grabbed the dog again as the van slowed down, turned sharp left and then stopped with a jerk. The twins lay still and looked up at the little window by the driving seat. It was nearly dark, but they saw the shadow of Slinky's head move and then the van creaked as he jumped out and slammed the door and they heard, in the welcome silence following the engine's clatter, the noise of his footsteps.

Mary released Macbeth and sat up. The little dog put his paws on her chest and licked her face.

"Oh, twin," she whispered, "what have we done? Where are we?"

Dickie sat up too. He felt better.

"We must get out and see where we are and where he's gone. Now's our chance, Mary... I'll open the doors."

The handle squeaked and Dickie pushed open the door very slowly. They peered out. It was dusk, but a dim street lamp showed them that they were in a narrow street.

"No houses," Dickie whispered. "Looks like factories or something. The backs of factories. I don't like it any more than Holloway Hill. He must have gone the other way."

They climbed out carefully and closed the doors of the van. Macbeth stretched and growled. They could now see that it was not a proper street. There were no pavements and it seemed to stop about fifty yards ahead. On their left was a wall but on their right the high, dingy buildings were sometimes broken by double doors and a few windows at ground floor level. There was no sign of Slinky but a few yards away they saw a gleam of light showing through some closed shutters.

"That's where he's gone," Dickie whispered. "Let's spy."

"Be good, Mackie," Mary hissed as they stood on tiptoe to look through a crack in the shutters. It was a wide crack because the shutters were falling to pieces, and they could quite easily see into the room. It was some sort of workshop lit by a naked electric bulb hanging above a carpenter's bench.

Slinky, now without his belted coat and cap which were hanging behind the door, was already at work framing a lovely Johnson's print of lilac. He was working quickly but deftly. There was a cupboard just behind the door and a black oil heater on which stood a rusty kettle. The cupboard door was open and they could see in it some tools, pots of paint, dirty cups and what looked like some sheets of thin brown wood. On the top of the cupboard, leaning against the wall, were some sheets of glass. The picture on which Slinky was now working must have been nearly finished because the print was already behind the glass and the frame nailed into position. They watched him fetch one of the sheets of wood, which had already been cut to shape, and fit it into the back of the frame and then secure it with some thin nails which he hammered in with quick precision. Then, from a lower shelf

of the cupboard he fetched some loose pages from illustrated magazines and a jam jar half full of white paste.

Dickie nudged his twin and whispered in her ear, "Bet those pages are like those he bought from us!"

Mary nodded. Her feet were aching because it was a great strain standing on tiptoe. She knew what Slinky was going to do but she wanted to see him actually doing it.

"Jiminy!" Dickie gasped. "We've seen him do it," and then clamour broke out in the narrow street. A shabby cat came racing towards them with Macbeth, barking wildly, in hot pursuit. When the cat saw the twins it swerved and leaped between them to the edge of the window, arched its back and swore and spat in fury as Mackie jumped towards it.

Suddenly, one of the double doors next to the workshop opened and there was Grandon, shining the beam of a big torch on them. Mary turned to run and fell flat on her face as she slipped on the rough surface of the street. Grandon stepped forward and Mackie, with teeth bared, went into battle while Dickie helped Mary to get up. Almost before he could ask her whether she was badly hurt, Grandon kicked the dog aside and grabbed them each by an arm and pulled them through the doorway. He slammed the door just as Mackie hurled himself against it.

Dickie wrenched himself free.

"Let my sister go," he stormed. "Let us both go. You daren't keep us here."

Grandon released them and then stood back and looked at them. They were in a dimly lighted room with a stone floor and whitewashed walls. In the far right hand corner was an open door leading, they guessed, either to a passage or to the workshop. Outside in the street Macbeth was still barking furiously.

Mary gulped back a sob, took Dickie's hand and glared at Grandon.

"Open that door and let us go," she said. "We know who you are."

"And I know who you are now," Slinky said, in the soft, hateful voice they remembered. "Meddling, impertinent children. Always interfering and spying. How did you get here?"

Dickie hoped that his voice wasn't shaking as he said, "That's nothing to do with you, Mr. Grandon, or whatever you call yourself now. We know what you do in that workshop. We know why you wanted old papers like those we sold you. You can't keep us here and nothing will stop Mackie barking except us and he won't go away without us."

Slinky leaned against the wall and lit one of his little black cigars.

"Is that so? There are ways of dealing with disobedient, noisy dogs and there are ways of dealing with nosey, interfering brats who have never learned to mind their own business... *Come here*. I am going to make arrangements to keep you quiet for a day or two. I do not mind that noisy dog. I have no neighbours. Nobody uses this street after dark. Come with me quietly and I will not hurt you. This time you have been too clever."

While he was speaking they heard Macbeth change the tone of his bark. When he had finished Dickie ran over to the door and pressed his ear to the wood.

"I can hear a car," he shouted. "The engine of a car, I mean. Now there are footsteps, twin."

Mary followed him and together they thumped on the door with their fists and shouted, "Help! Help us, whoever you are! We're prisoners."

White with fury Slinky rushed at them, but they dodged him and continued to bang on the door.

"Keep away from us!" Dickie shouted triumphantly. "You dare not touch us now. There's somebody outside and you said nobody came here after dark."

"Open the door and let us out," Mary stormed. "Our friends are outside. *Open the door*."

Slinky thrust his hands in his pockets and glared at them. He was beaten and knew it. As he moved forward with a key in his hand there came a thunderous knocking from outside. Then, "Are you in there, Richard and Mary? Come out at once."

"It's Mr. Sparrow!" Dickie yelled. "There you are, old stinky Slinky! Didn't we say that our friends knew where we were? Now you'll *have* to let us out... *Here we are, Mr. Sparrow. It's us.* We've been waiting for you."

Grandon opened the door, pushed the twins violently into the street and slammed and locked it behind them. Dickie slipped and fell as Mackie jumped joyfully at him while Mary stumbled into Mr. Sparrow. It was too dark now to see the old man's face, but his voice was so chokey that Mary knew he was very upset.

"Are either of you hurt, Mary? Are you both all right?" And then to their surprise he went down on his knees in the road and helped Dickie to struggle to his feet. "Are you sure he hasn't hurt you, my boy? I was a very foolish old man ever to take you on this ridiculous expedition."

Mary was feeling near tears, but she was so overcome by Mr. Sparrow's anxiety for them that she stopped and kissed the old man's stubbly cheek.

"It's not riddickerlus," she said. "It's been wonderful because we've found out everything. Thank you very much for rescuing us. We'll tell you everything that happened, but first of all we'll show you Slinky in his horrid, smelly den."

"Stinky Slinky," said Dickie with relish as he got up. "I like that name for him... Is that taxi waiting for us, sir?"

"Of course it is, my dears. It's going to take you straight home... You were very wrong to leave that cafe without letting me know."

"We couldn't do that, sir. We saw Stinky Slinky go into the shop and we took action... Come and see him in his lair."

Mr. Sparrow was led to the shuttered window and told to look through the crack while the twins took it in turns to stand on tiptoe between him and the wall so that they could see what Slinky was doing. He obviously had no idea that he was being watched and it was also clear that he was very shaken by what had happened. He was trying to clear up the workshop and pushing tools, pieces of wood, and pots of paint into an old tea chest which he had pulled out from beneath the bench. His pale face glistened with sweat as he worked. He was scared.

"He's going to put all that stuff in his van and just drive off somewhere and never come back," Mary whispered. "Could we hide and then, when he drives off in that awful van, follow him in your super taxi, Mr. Sparrow?"

"Certainly not, child. We must go before he comes out I'm going to telephone to your home from the nearest box and say you are safe and then take you back at once. No arguments, either. What was he doing in there?"

"Framing pictures of flowers, putting a bit of wood on the back and then pasting pages from the old papers like those he bought from us over the back of everything," Dickie said tersely.

"Very well. Now we will go. I can find this place again. Into the taxi quickly."

The twins ran ahead down the dingy street with Macbeth at their heels and tumbled into the taxi. Mr. Sparrow followed more slowly and told the driver to stop at the first box and then go on to Brownlow Square.

"Tell us how you found us please, Mr. Sparrow. It was wonderful of you to rescue us just at that very minute. Slinky was getting nasty. He came out and caught us because Mackie was a noisy, naughty boy chasing a cat. We'd been watching Slinky for a long time through the window."

"We knew he couldn't and wouldn't really hurt us," Dickie broke in. "He's afraid of us, acksherley. How did you find us?"

"I was very disturbed when I found you had left the cafe," admitted Mr. Sparrow. "Very upset. The woman there told me that you had got into the

van so I went back to that disgusting paper shop and told the man that I would fetch the police if he did not disclose Grandon's address. After some arguments he gave way and it is as well that he did. I was becoming very angry... Ah! Here is a call box. Wait for me. I am going to tell your father that you are safe and well and on the way home."

The twins had not much to say while he was away. They were feeling tired and rather battered.

Mr. Sparrow was back in five minutes.

"Did you speak to Daddy?" Mary yawned as he got in.

"I did," Mr. Sparrow replied grimly. "Your father is very angry. The others have not returned, neither have they sent a message."

10. The Penthouse

As Wilson and Judith, with Penny, Jon, David and Harriet drove off from Brownlow Square, determined to find the place where the latter had seen Grandon climbing up the fire escape, Wilson warned her that everything now depended on her.

"All you've got to do when we get to Hyde Park Corner is to tell Judith which way to drive. Don't worry. You'll remember when you get there."

But Harriet, who ever since she had got into the car had been staring straight ahead and looking acutely unhappy, suddenly put her hands to her face and sobbed.

"But I *can't* remember, I tell you. I've tried and tried but I don't know where it was. You keep worrying me, but what happened last night is getting like a dream. It doesn't seem real any more... Why don't you all let me alone?"

Then Penny leaned forward and glared at Wilson as she put her hands on Harriet's shoulders.

"Of course we'll let you alone, Harry. Don't take any notice of James. He knows we've all promised to help him get his story and you know that we're all, each one of us, going to help you to remember. There's nothing to fuss about, honestly. We're all in this together and none of us are as brave as you were last night. We know how lucky we are to have met you and if James has any sense he'll leave all this to us."

Then Judith, after she had swerved past a bus, put her hand over Harriet's.

"I'm not very used to James yet, Harry, but I'm learning that sometimes men are silly. There's a clean hanky in my bag if you'd like it."

Dusk fell as Judith drove south. Wilson fidgeted, lit his pipe and filled the old car with tobacco smoke while Penny did all she could to make Harriet relax.

"I do want to help you all, of course," Harriet said as Judith drove into the West End. "I'm sorry I was so silly just now, but the trouble is that I can't remember how I got to that place. I was just following Slinky. I was too excited to notice the names of the roads or streets we went through. What I remember better than anything else is that dark yard with the narrow entrance, and that big car with lamps like blazing eyes coming at me."

"Why should the car want to come in there?" Jon asked from the back seat. "It couldn't be anything to do with the man you saw climbing the fire escape, could it?"

Harriet shook her head. "I don't think so. At the end of that yard there were big doors and they must have been of a garage... I've been wondering since why that woman was so rude to me. I hated her. She had a hideous voice and she seemed angry with me for being there. 'Come here!' she said, but I just ran away."

"Coming up to Hyde Park Corner now," Judith said. "I know where your bus would stop, Harry, so have a good look round. I can't go fast. There's too much traffic."

"I know where I got off the bus," Harriet said shortly, but there was doubt in her voice and Penny began to feel worried. She was the only one who realized that Harriet had been really frightened yesterday and was now so anxious to please that she might be tempted to say anything.

The traffic of London's rush hour roared round them. Monster red buses closed in on them from all sides as Judith drove slowly across Grosvenor Place into Knightsbridge and pulled in to the pavement just past the Tube Station.

"I can't stop here, Harriet," she said. "But you do remember getting off the bus, don't you? Look behind and you'll see the bus stop. If you're sure of that we're over the first hurdle and maybe you'll soon remember some more."

Wilson helped Harriet out on to the pavement.

"You remember this, don't you? I expect you followed Slinky along this pavement through the crowds? You're sure of that, aren't you?"

Harriet's lip quivered. "Yes. That was it. I suppose so. He crossed over somewhere and I did too. I think we crossed lots of big roads. P'raps I could remember the way if you didn't all worry me."

Wilson took her arm. "Get back in the car, Harry. We'll look at the map, and then we'll all try to help you."

Judith drove on, turned to the left in a side street and parked under a street lamp. The boys got out and stretched their legs and Penny followed them.

"If you all go on nagging at Harriet, we shall be in a in real mess," she hissed. "She isn't used to being mixed up in adventures like this. She wants to be with us but the truth is she's scared of failing us."

David nodded. "Fair enough, but I know why James is so impatient He must get results quickly. Let's go and look at the map and see how we can split up and explore parts of the district."

It was soon evident that maps didn't mean much to Harriet, and she explained that she had never been in the district before last night. Wilson, trying hard to be patient, showed her that as the Park was directly to the north of Knightsbridge there were no streets there, so that the courtyard or mews in which she saw Grandon on the ladder must be somewhere between Sloane Street and King's Road on the south and Cromwell Road or even Kensington Gore to the north. But all she could say was that she supposed he was right and that she would try and find the place if someone would go with her. Then Jon, to change the subject, asked her if she was sure that the man climbing the ladder was Grandon, and she could only say that she supposed so but how could she be sure when she couldn't see his face.

It was at this stage that Wilson looked at his watch, passed the map to Judith and put his arm round Harriet's shoulders.

"Don't mind telling us now, Harriet. It's always better to tell the truth and we shall understand if you say now that you didn't really come here last

night and see that man going up the ladder. Just tell us now so that we know where we are, but as you can't remember anything important-----"

Then Harriet burst into tears again and Judith tried to comfort her while Penny turned on Wilson.

"All right, all right," the latter said when he could make himself heard. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm sorry. Of course you came here. Of course you followed Grandon. It's just that I'm in a hurry and we must find this place. I'm sure that if you could show us that ladder we should be at the beginning of the end of a very big story... Am I forgiven, Harry?"

"Of course. I think you're wonderful. I'm sorry I'm so silly, but I will try to remember if you all help me."

After some discussion Wilson agreed that Jon and David should go off for an hour and explore an area between Brompton Road and King's Road. Wilson marked the area with pencil.

"One of you boys make a sketch of the area and take it with you... O.K., Jon. On the back of that envelope will do, but don't let's waste time by covering the same ground. Judith and I will take Harriet because she's our only link with Grandon and we can cover more ground more quickly in the car. Penny had better go with you both, unless one of you boys would agree to cover a smaller area by yourself. I don't really think it's a good idea to hunt singly considering what we know of Grandon and his friends."

"Not worth arguing about," Penny said briskly. "I'm coming in the car, James. I wouldn't leave Harry unprotected with you and besides I think we might do some searching together while Judith and you patrol wider areas in the car. You'd like me with you, wouldn't you, Harry?"

Harriet nodded and Wilson said, "Good enough. If you boys are ready now you'd better be off... Just look at the map again, Jon, and we'll arrange a rendezvous for an hour from now... See this? In about the middle of your area there's a street called Arcadia Street and turning out of it is South Tenby Street. We'll meet at the corner of those two streets in an hour unless Harriet finds the place first. If she does we'll drive into your area and search

until we find you, after leaving somebody - probably me - to mark the spot."

"Suppose we find it?" David asked. "I s'pose one of us had better keep guard too, and the other go to Arcadia Street and guide you to the place when you turn up?"

They all agreed that this was the best idea, and before there could be any further argument Jon and David waved cheerfully and set off to explore their area. Jon had a methodical mind and saw that the only way to do this properly was for them to walk on opposite sides of every street they explored and then mark his sketch map with a ballpoint and strike that street off.

"O.K.," David agreed. "I'll write down the name of every street, square and alley that we walk down. I don't want to do anything twice and it will be a double check on your map... Come on. We've only got an hour."

Their district was very varied. As they moved farther south the squares gave way to streets some of which were residential and some had a few smart shops. The most attractive of the latter seemed to be Arcadia Street which they found easily enough. It seemed to be better lit than the other streets, and from where they stood at one end the boys noticed that the houses on both sides were brightly painted and that some had coloured front doors.

"You cross over and take the right hand side," Jon said. "This street doesn't look as if it would have any sinister courtyards in it - much too smart."

"Quietly expensive and possibly exclusive," David grinned. "Some of them have window boxes and there are some brass plates too."

He whistled quietly to himself as he hurried along the pavement. Cars were parked outside some of the houses where lights glowed behind curtains. David was still whistling when the door of one of these houses opened and a man and a woman in evening dress came out and got into a waiting car. It was all very respectable and pleasant and he was just thinking how different Arcadia Street was from Brownlow Square when he heard running footsteps behind him.

He turned in surprise and saw Jon racing down the middle of the street towards him. David was waiting for him.

"I'm sure I've found it, David. It's a few yards down South Tenby Street over there. Didn't you see me turn down that street? It's dark and narrow but the entrance to a courtyard is there right enough. I didn't go in there to look for the fire escape without you. Come on. Seems as if we're on the trail now."

"Fantastic, as Dickie would say!" David laughed. "We'd better make sure before we report to James. D'you know, Jon, I was beginning to wonder whether Harriet had made it up?"

"We'll soon see. Come on."

He led the way back to the entrance of a narrow and gloomy little street and hurried forward.

"There you are," Jon said as he stopped under the street lamp. "It's just as she said. Here's the narrow entrance where she was nearly knocked down by the car."

David looked up at the dirty walls under the archway.

"It ought to have a name. Places like this in London do. Wish we had a torch."

"I can see a nameplate," Jon said. "It hasn't been cleaned for years... Look! 'Tenby Mews'."

They stepped forward together across the cobbles and in the far corner showed them the big double doors of what was probably a garage. On their right and above the garage were the backs of houses, but there was no sign of a ladder on those dirty walls.

Then they looked to their left and saw there an alley at right angles to the courtyard. On the left of this was a door and two lighted windows and opposite these a very high wall.

David stepped forward.

"There it is!" he said excitedly. "Good old Harry! Here's the fire escape, Jon, running right up this wall. Let's get our bearings."

It was an odd place but there are many such in London. As they stood with the iron ladder on the right and looked ahead, the backs of the houses of Arcadia Street towered, like black cliffs into the night sky. There was enough light for them to see the ladder stretching upwards for three floors to a flat roof surrounded by a coping.

"There's something on that roof," David whispered. "Come back into the yard. We may be able to see more now that we know what to look for."

They stepped back on to the cobbles.

"Looks like a building of some sort on the flat roof," Jon suggested. "What do they call a place like that, David? Penthouse? That's it. A penthouse... Well, we've found it and I can understand young Harriet not liking it much. It's a grisly sort of place." He looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes before we meet the others. Shall we go and find them, or wait at the corner of the street and keep a lookout for the car that uses that garage?"

"More important to watch this ladder and see if Slinky does one of his famous appearing and vanishing tricks again... No, Jon. What fools we are. There's only one thing to do, of course. Come on. We're going up the ladder."

Jon nodded. "O.K. Better stick together rather than separate, but don't let's be too long. I don't want to keep the others waiting. You first. I'm not so sure that I'm much good at heights."

David led the way into the gloom of the alley.

"Sing out if you want a rest, Jon. Best thing is to go up steadily and don't look down. Take it easy. Here we go."

The iron rungs of the ladder were bitterly cold and after the first twenty steps the climb was not as easy as David had expected.

"You all right, Jon?" he whispered. "Like to rest?"

"No. Go on. Get it over. I don't want anybody to see us on this ladder... Get on... Let's save our breath."

David took another ten steps up and realized that they were climbing out of the darkness below into starlight. He did not mind heights but was worried when he heard Jon mutter through clenched teeth, "Go on, David. I can't stick much more... Go on."

The perspiration was icy cold on David's forehead when he clambered over the stone parapet on to a flat leaded roof and then turned to help Jon.

"Sorry about that fuss," the latter whispered as he mopped his face and sat on the coping beside David. "I'll be all right next time. The first time is the worst. Let's see what all this is about. There's something going on round here. I've got a feeling that there's somebody in this penthouse. Let's have a look round and then get down the ladder again."

They saw that one end of the penthouse was built flush against the wall of the back of a house in Arcadia Street. There were two or three windows facing their way in this wall but they were all dark.

The wall of the penthouse opposite to them was windowless, but David pointed to a soft glow of light which seemed to be coming from the other side of the sloping roof.

"You're right, Jon. There's somebody in there. Keep quiet and listen."

They stood very still, but all that they could hear was the distant hum of London's traffic and the sudden crescendo of a taxi accelerating after a gear change in the street below.

David signalled Jon to follow him and stepped quietly round to the front of the penthouse which was in shadow. Here was a stout door with a yale lock.

Jon put his fingers on the handle but David snatched them away with a whispered warning about noise, walked round to the other side and pointed upwards. There was a skylight here built into the sloping roof, and although it must have been shielded by blinds inside some light was showing.

"I'm going to look through that window before we go back," David whispered close to Jon's ear. "This is too good a chance to miss. If you give me a shove up I can lean on the roof and look through. Slinky may be there now."

"Haven't we found enough, David? The others will be waiting for us now."

"Won't take a sec," David whispered. "We must see what's going on in there... Shove me up."

Jon braced himself against the wall of the penthouse and then clasped his hands so that David could get one foot in them. He heaved, and heard David's fingers scrabbling for a hold on the roof and then stood upright when his friend's feet were resting on his shoulders.

David found himself looking down on the large skylight. As he had suspected, a blind covered the glass inside, but there were several gaps between the edge of the blind and the window frame. He drew in his breath sharply as he looked down into the brightly lighted workshop. To his amazement he saw two men wearing green eye-shades working at sloping drawing boards. He could not recognize their faces but he was sure that neither was Slinky Grandon. The room was thick with cigarette smoke, but he could see that the man directly below was colouring what looked like an old-fashioned hunting scene and, in a flash, David realized that they had surely solved the mystery which meant so much to James Wilson.

In his excitement he turned his head to whisper his news, but he moved too suddenly and his right foot slipped from Jon's shoulder. With an appalling clatter he struggled to hold his position and his head crashed on the glass. At that moment the blind inside was released and David, with his face pressed against the glass, saw a pale-faced man with a beard staring at him. Then he felt his fingers slipping and realized that Jon was no longer

supporting him. With a startled cry he slid off the roof and fell on Jon who was trying to struggle to his feet.

"Sorry!" David gasped. "You O.K., Jon?"

"Hope so. I couldn't hold you... Let's get out of this."

Feeling shaken and dizzy, they staggered back towards the fire escape, but as they reached the corner of the penthouse the door was flung open and they were confronted by two men. The taller of the two, who was thin and bald, stepped forward so that he could see the two boys in the light streaming from the open door.

"Boys!" he said softly. "Two gangling lads. Well! Well! Come in, boys, and explain yourselves."

The bearded man, who was coughing, stepped behind Jon and pushed him into the lighted room. There was no chance of escape; they were too shaken and dazed and, although it did not occur to either of them, there would have been no sense in putting up a fight with only a coping about two feet high above a high drop to the cobbled yard below.

The tall man slammed and locked the door behind them and then pushed the boys in a corner. In the hot, stuffy atmosphere of the workshop, David suddenly felt dizzy; he grabbed the edge of a table to steady himself as the man's face swung away and then rushed forward at him.

"Say nothing," Jon whispered under his breath. "We're in now. See what they've got to say first."

David closed his eyes tight and then raised his head. Everything came back into focus. The man with the beard was at the far end of the room with his finger on the button of a bell-push.

"That's the alarm," he said. "Better telephone," and he lifted the receiver.

"So you were spying through the skylight?" said the tall man. "Why did you climb up the escape? What do you want up here?"

The other man spoke into the receiver before Jon or David need bother to think of an answer.

"Number six here. Have caught two boys snooping round the penthouse and spying on us through the skylight... Schoolboy types. Sixteen, maybe... Dunno. Haven't asked them but they're here. We've got 'em but they've seen everything. Thought it better to keep 'em... Very good. We'll do that. Five minutes... No. There'll be no trouble... In the morning as usual..."

He turned to his tall companion.

"You heard. We're to be out in five minutes and everything locked away. There's to be no talking. Nothing at all. Not to them... Let's move."

Jon and David watched in astonishment as the two men took partly-coloured black and white prints of hunting scenes from their drawing boards and put them, together with two framed copies of genuine pictures, into the safe. They worked quickly and spoke neither to each other nor to their prisoners. When everything except the pots of paint and some dirty cups had been crammed into the safe, the latter was locked by the man with the beard. Then the two men put on hats and coats and went to the door.

"No sense trying to get out. We shall lock the door from the outside. I suppose you could smash the skylight with a chair, but I shouldn't try. Don't lay yourself open to more trouble than you're going to get. You're in for plenty... Silly young fools."

They went out and the boys heard the lock click home. Jon stepped forward and looked up at the skylight.

"Better have a look round before we do smash it," he said. "We might find another clue. Anyway, we know where we are."

"All right," David agreed, "but we don't know how to get out and it's time---"

His voice died away in a gasp of surprise and fear as he grabbed Jon's arm and swung him round so that he was facing the wall at the end of the room.

There were bookshelves there on which were some magazines, cups, a teapot, a half-empty milk bottle and the telephone. Suddenly, a line of vertical orange light appeared on the wall behind the shelves... Slowly the secret door opened and in a gap a man's hand appeared.

11. "It's Ballinger!"

Slowly, very slowly and silently the secret door behind the bookcases opened while Jon and David stared at it as if hypnotized. Then David broke the spell and yelled, "Quick, Jon. Try the other door."

They turned and dashed for the door through which the two forgers had just disappeared, but it was locked. They were trapped.

"Come here," a soft voice behind them said. "Don't exhaust yourselves before you need. There are only two doors to this penthouse - the one you've been struggling with, which is firmly locked, and the other which I use when the need arises. There is no handle on this side of my door and you two are specially privileged. You are among the few people who know that there is such a door... Now come here and let me look at you."

The secret door was now wide open, and they saw that part of the bookshelves was fixed to it. The man who was now standing just inside the workshop was enormous - well over six feet and very thick-set. He was well dressed in a black jacket and waistcoat and striped trousers, a white collar and a grey tie with a pearl pin in it. His plump face was clean-shaven with smooth, glistening pink cheeks and his thinning hair which was just turning grey was brushed straight back from his forehead. He looked as if he had just come from the barbers, smelling of refreshing lotions and brilliantine. He stood quite still and stared at them as they stepped forward. His eyes were hard and unwinking. His lips barely moved as he spoke and his voice was soft and very menacing.

"Do not waste my time, I beg. Tell me quickly who you are and how you got here before I fetch the police... *Answer me, you.* What's your name and where do you live?"

Jon tried to keep his voice steady.

"Our names don't matter and neither do our addresses. We could make those up anyway. Please unlock this door and let us go. We're doing no harm and

we'll leave without any fuss. It won't be so bad climbing down the ladder as it was coming up."

"Why did you climb the ladder?"

Jon shrugged. "We saw it there and wondered where it led. We were exploring the district, you see. Anyway, my pal here dared me to climb it and we did. We were just looking round when the door opened, and two rather scruffy types pounced on us and dragged us in here."

"I beg your pardon. Did you say *scruffy* types?"

"That's right. They really were. One with too much hair on his face and the other with no hair on the top of his head. Unhealthy they looked. The bearded chap used that telephone and then they bolted. They didn't seem to like us much. Can't think why."

"Can't you? I'm beginning to understand why. You're very glib, young man. Much too glib. What about your sulky friend here? He hasn't much to say. What's your name, boy?"

David grinned at him. He was feeling better now and Jon had given him a fine lead.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Just before we go I would like to tell you how very impressed we are by that secret door. This place is rather like a pantomime, isn't it? I mean some things disappear into that safe. Then a couple of poor types vanish down a fire escape and before we can get our breath back you suddenly appear. Why did the bearded man press an alarm bell?"

The big man stepped forward into the workshop. Neither of them were surprised that his footsteps were silent.

"I ask the questions, not you," he said in the same expressionless voice. "You answer them... You are house-breakers. You trespassed by climbing the ladder. You were trespassing on the roof. You broke the skylight and

forced your way in here and unless you answer my questions quickly and truthfully I shall call the police."

"We'd be glad if you would," David said hotly. "We've got a story to tell the police too, and as soon as we get out of here we're going to them. Stop trying to bully us and let us go. You know we're doing no harm and what you say about the skylight is just silly."

The man lifted a chair and poked gently at the glass of the skylight.

"Not silly, young man! This glass is easy to break and that's the way you two came in. Nobody will believe your tale of two men in here."

"Yes they will," David argued, and in spite of a warning jab from Jon's elbow in his back he went on. "We saw what they were doing. They were forging pictures."

There was a long silence. Then,

"Is that so?" the big man whispered. "Forging pictures indeed? I think you'd better come with me and we'll have a nice cosy little chat. You're not well, boys. You've been seeing things that don't exist. It's a doctor you want before a policeman. No wonder you can't remember how you got here. No wonder you wander round the streets at night and climb ladders and trespass and break skylights and imagine things... Come along and we'll give you both a nice big dose of soothing medicine."

He didn't raise his voice but he came close to them and so enormous was he that he made Jon, who was three inches taller than David, look small. Then, as quickly and silently as a cat he grasped them each by the back of their coat collars and swung them towards the narrow opening of the secret door. At the feel of the man's hand on his neck David lost his temper and began to struggle. It was a crazy thing to do because his opponent was strong enough to take on four boys. In a flash, his huge hand closed round David's wrist and twisted his arm behind his back so swiftly that he cried out in pain.

"Let him go," Jon shouted. "Let him go. We'll come with you. Shut up, David. Don't be such a fool."

Rather surprisingly both of them did as they were told.

"Very stupid of you," the man said. "You will both walk a yard in front of me and obey my orders. Now go and stand one pace through the doorway and don't move until I say."

The boys obeyed and Jon whispered urgently to David, "Don't fight him. This chap may be the boss, but I don't think so. We can find out more if we don't struggle and we must be near finding the answer now..."

David nodded agreement and then turned his head.

"Eyes front of you, please," came the order. "Now walk straight ahead and stop at the top of the staircase."

The passage was uncarpeted and the walls of plain plaster. They felt as if they were walking in a prison. After ten paces they reached a sharp turn to the left and they saw below them a steep staircase.

"Now stand aside. I will go first," came the softly spoken order. "The door behind you is locked. There is nowhere for you to run. You will follow me carefully through the next door and *you will keep quiet*"

The staircase was so narrow that they could not see past the big man as he went down. Jon followed after giving David a warning look as if to say "Don't make things more difficult than they are. Let him do the talking."

The man reached the bottom of the stairs and they heard the click of a lock.

"One at a time and tread carefully," he said. "I hope your shoes are clean."

They soon saw what he meant. First they stepped into a big cupboard in which rows of men's clothes were hanging and from that to the softly carpeted floor of a beautifully furnished bedroom. As David stepped down the man closed the cupboard door behind him.

"Now listen," he said softly. "You boys have asked for trouble. You have a very high nuisance value to certain important people. I do not like violence so I am warning you now to take very great care as to how you behave and

what you say during your stay in this house. I am warning you now. Follow me."

During this speech, in which he never raised his voice, he looked at them unwinkingly with cold blue eyes and both boys admitted later that they had never been so frightened. There was something terrifying about such soft, cold-blooded speech coming from a man so well groomed and well dressed.

Their captor then turned on his heel, opened the bedroom door and led them along a short corridor and then down a flight of wide stairs. The house in which they now found themselves was the most luxurious either of them had ever seen. Jon remembered that the penthouse had been on a roof-top at least three stories high, and when the man stopped in front of a white door on the next floor he was sure that they were not yet on ground level.

"Remember," the man said as he turned the handle. "Behave yourselves," and he opened the door and went in.

Feeling suddenly grubby and awkward, the boys followed him and found themselves in a large, beautifully furnished sitting-room. The walls were pale grey, the carpet rose coloured and there were some enormous easy chairs. The gleam of silver and the sheen of lovely china on side tables and a superb oval mirror above the mantelpiece... they took in the beauty and luxury quickly enough; and then their eyes went to the figure of a middle-aged woman sitting on a huge couch by a fire of blazing logs. She was dressed in black with a gleaming brooch at her throat. Her hair was grey, blue-rinsed, and she was wearing spectacles so strong that her eyes looked small behind the lenses.

The man walked across the soft carpet and stood close to her.

"These are our two visitors. They were in the penthouse and can give no satisfactory explanation of how or why they got there except for a fantastic story of being dragged in by two men. I have told them that they are trespassing, but they are inclined to be truculent."

"Thank you, Louis," the woman said in a harsh, deep voice. "How very discourteous of our uninvited visitors and what very odd habits they seem

to have! Do they have a nightly custom of climbing fire escapes, one wonders?"

Although they would hardly have recognized her if they had met her in the street, they knew her by her harsh voice which she would never be able to disguise. They were face to face with the Ballinger again, but she was so shortsighted that it was by no means certain that she had yet recognized them. But what a transformation! When they had first known her she had been stout and ungainly with untidy, short, straggly hair. Her usual dress had been shapeless tweeds with thick stockings and stout brown brogue shoes.

The woman on the sofa was much, much slimmer than the old Ballinger. She was elegant and had an air of authority about her, but although her spectacles had fashionable blue frames the lenses seemed even thicker than they used to be.

"Come over here," she said sharply. "Since you are our guests I should like to see more of you. Come here and sit down. We will all sit down and discuss this remarkable situation."

The big man pulled up two chairs to the other side of the fireplace and signed to the boys to sit. He sat down himself next to the Ballinger who peered short-sightedly at Jon and David before saying,

"Now tell me your names, where you come from and why you have broken into private property. And be quick about it."

They told the same story as before, but when they asserted that they had been attacked by two men and pushed into the penthouse the big man roared with laughter.

"What is amusing you, Louis?"

"All this talk of two men! What nonsense. Even if two men had been there, how would they know that these trespassers were outside? These boys smashed the glass of the skylight and dropped in. It was lucky I was in the passage and heard them before I opened the door."

This really stung David. "You're a liar," he said furiously. "There's no other word for it. You know perfectly well that the chap with a beard rang an alarm bell and then used the telephone."

Louis smoothed his face with a silk handkerchief. "I fear you boys may be in need of medical attention," he said softly. "You are both suffering from hallucinations."

Miss Ballinger gave her companion a swift look and then boomed, "Dear me. How very sad. Now tell me your names and why you climbed that ladder. You first, boy. You with the glasses."

Jon refused. "It won't mean anything to you. I'm sorry you don't believe us but we didn't mean any harm. We didn't smash the skylight and there were two men there who heard us and dragged us in. What David said is right. They rang through to somebody about us on the telephone on the bookshelves by the secret door."

Miss Ballinger peered at them again, took a cigarette from a box on the mantelpiece and sat down after the man had lit it for her.

"Extraordinary!" she said after a long silence. "They must be unbalanced, Louis. They cannot be well. Don't bother about going through their pockets for the moment. I think they need some sort of special treatment."

There was something very menacing in the way in which she spoke and Jon began to wonder seriously how they were going to get out of this mess. He looked up quickly at Louis and noticed a pulse beating rapidly in his cheek. With a sudden stab of fear Jon realized that the man was furiously angry, but before he could speak a telephone buzzed. There was a white instrument on a side table, but Miss Ballinger glanced at Louis and then looked at the door. The big man moved quickly and silently across the carpet and went out of the room. A few seconds later the telephone was silent.

"Sit down, boys, and listen to me," Miss Ballinger tried again. "I am still at a loss to understand why you think you can break into my house, and a little later we will share the secret of your identity. Meanwhile I must tell you that you are talking complete nonsense about what you saw in my

penthouse. You did not see two men. You smashed the glass of the skylight and made a forcible entry. You are house-breakers. As for the other nonsense you were bad-mannered enough to inflict on us just now, I can only assume that you are both suffering from delusions. That is the kindest thing I can say to you... But I am not feeling kindly towards you at all... Ah! Here is Louis again..."

The big man stood just inside the door. He seemed agitated. "Please come at once," he said to Miss Ballinger. "Or shall I remove our uninvited guests while you speak on the telephone here?"

The woman went to the door and then turned to the boys.

"Don't be so foolish as to smash any more windows in an attempt to escape, and do not use the telephone for it will be disconnected."

Louis locked the door from the outside and the boys were alone. Jon ran across to the telephone and lifted the receiver.

"She was right. It's dead. What are we going to do, David? It is the Ballinger, of course. Does she know us?"

"I think so. Sorry I lost my temper and gave the game away, Jon. I was a fool, I suppose. It's just that I got fed up with the whole dirty business and that big bully in particular. Maybe we'd have done better to wait for James and the others. I s'pose they're waiting quite near now? This house could be in Arcadia Street, couldn't it? Let's look out of the window."

But the windows were covered with wooden shutters behind the curtains and before they could explore further they heard the key in the lock. They were sitting back in their two chairs when the big man hurried in.

"Are you coming quietly or have I got to make you? I've no time to waste. Make up your minds. You're both going to get hurt if I set about you. Coming quietly?"

"You can't talk to us like that," David said hotly. "I s'pose you're in a panic now because our friends have come for us and-----"

Louis stepped forward as quickly as a cat and as his fist came up Jon pushed his friend back into his chair.

"Shut up, David. Don't be a fool. He's too strong for us... Very well. We'll come with you."

Louis nodded his approval and taking each boy firmly by the arm led them out of the room, along the corridor, down a wide staircase, across a hall and down more stairs into a basement. He said nothing beyond giving a few brief orders. They met nobody, nor did they see the Ballinger again. He led them along a dimly lit corridor, opened a door on the left and pushed them into a cellar half full of coal.

"No sense in making a row. Nobody will hear. I shall be back for you soon," he said and then locked the door behind him.

Once again the boys were alone. There were ventilation holes at the top of the door and through these came enough light from the bulb in the passage for them to see each other.

"They're in a spot," David whispered excitedly as Louis' footsteps died away. "I swear they're in trouble. That telephone message upset them. Something has happened. Could it be the others?"

"How could it? They don't know where we are and even if they're hanging about Arcadia Street now they can't possibly guess that we're here. If we'd had any sense we'd have left a clue or a message somewhere for them... I've got a hunch that they're moving out, David. They may not come back for us, of course, and if they don't we can smash our way out of here eventually. I hope they're not too long making up their minds. I'm getting cold."

"So am I. Teeth chattering... Jon. They dare not let us go, dare they? Although they tried all that business of pretending we didn't see the two forgers, they know that we did. We're dangerous to them now and I've landed you into a first-class mess."

Jon tried the door before he answered. It was locked fast and more solid than he had expected it to be. It would take a long time to smash it down

with lumps of coal!

"No good worrying about whose fault it is if we're shut up in a cellar in Arcadia Street. I still think we ought to let them give themselves away. Don't scrap with them yet, David. We may have to make a break for it soon, but I believe they've decided to take us with them when they go. Let's drop some sort of a message somewhere in the hope that the others will find it, and go with these thugs to see if we can discover anything else. If they're on the run let's find out where they're going."

David nodded gloomily.

"Hurry, then. What sort of a message?"

Jon brought from his pocket the envelope on the back of which he had made a sketch map of the district.

"All I've got. Lend me a pencil."

He held the paper high against the rough brick wall so that enough light fell on it for him to see what he was writing. He wrote - IT'S TENBY MEWS. JUST OFF ARCADIA STREET. IT'S BALLINGER WE'RE SURE BUT THEY'RE TAKING US OFF SOMEWHERE. JON AND DAVID.

"How you expect that to make sense to anyone who doesn't know us is beyond me," David said with chattering teeth. "I'm beginning to think we're a couple of fools... Here comes his lordship. Let's pretend to be just about down and out and so feeble that we wouldn't even kick him if he was bending down."

Jon chuckled but they kept quiet while somebody unlocked the door.

"Come out and hurry and no nonsense."

It was Louis, of course, but now he was wearing an enormous belted overcoat and a cap.

"Where are you taking us?" Jon said in what he hoped was a whining sort of voice. "Why don't you let us go now? We won't tell anybody we've seen

you."

"I'm taking you for a nice ride, my sonny boys. And when we get to where we're going I'm going to have a long, long talk to you both. I'm getting very interested in you two. Something seems to tell me that you're enterprising lads... Come on. *Get moving. Straight ahead.*"

He opened the door at the end of the passage. "I'll help you up these steps," he said. "Don't let the fresh air go to your heads," and he grabbed each boy by a wrist and dragged them up into an alley with a high wall on their left and the backs of houses on their right. They realized at once that they were at the end of the alley that led into Tenby Mews and were not really surprised to see a big car standing a few yards away on the cobbles.

Louis released Jon's wrist to open the car door and Jon managed to get the message from his pocket and drop it. The Ballinger, in a fur coat, with a scarf over her blue hair, was at the wheel, and the thought crossed David's mind that if she couldn't see well enough to drive they might have an adventurous journey. The man pushed them into the back seat and squeezed himself between them.

The big car glided smoothly under the archway and turned right into South Tenby Street. And as they turned the corner the driver switched on the headlights and there, clear in the beam, were Penny and Harriet running towards them. The car's engine was almost silent and they heard Harriet scream as she dragged Penny to the pavement. In spite of all his good intentions Jon shouted in triumph and Louis, with a curse, thrust his great hand across the boy's mouth and nose.

Miss Ballinger, after a glance in her driving mirror, accelerated and the great car leapt forward. Then, when she was only about ten yards from Arcadia Street, Judith's old car swung round the corner. South Tenby Street was narrow and the two cars seemed certain to collide. David began to struggle and shouted to attract the attention of their friends. But Louis's powerful hand found the back of his neck and forced his head down, and their car cut across the pavement, missing Judith's by inches and then accelerated like a racing car down Arcadia Street.

12. Pursuit

As soon as David and Jon went off to explore their territory Wilson got back into the car. "Am I still forgiven, Harry? Sorry I was so short with you. Judith knows how important it is for me to get this story. We want to get married, and if I'm lucky it will help to persuade my editor that I'm an important sort of chap who is worth much more money to him. See?"

"Oh! I do forgive you. Really I do. It's just that I'm so silly about all this and I do so want to help you. I really will try now, specially if Penny will come with me."

"That's fine," Wilson went on. "Don't worry any more. It's my fault for making you worry. You sit with Penny in the back. If you see any street or the entrance to any courtyard that reminds you of the one where you were nearly run down, just sing out and Judith will stop."

"No she won't," Judith laughed. "I'm tired of driving. You take over, Jimmy, and I'll mark the map. Come on. Change over."

So Wilson got out again and while Judith studied the map Penny tried to reassure Harriet.

"If you don't worry so much we shall find it. We must find it, Harry. You can't have been anywhere that isn't on the map and we've got the map and between us we're going down every street."

Harriet nodded enthusiastically.

It sounded a simple, straightforward scheme that should have worked easily, but it didn't. First of all Wilson drove too fast. Harriet got flurried and insisted on getting out and going back to see whether they had missed a narrow entrance. Penny always went with her and during the first twenty minutes they only managed to explore two longish streets.

Then Harriet gave a false alarm. She found a cobbled yard at the dark end of a narrow street, but when, with Penny, she went cautiously under the

archway she knew she was wrong again.

"I'm sorry, Penny. It looked as if it might be the one from outside, but the man I saw on the ladder was high up on a dark wall. The backs of the houses were taller than these. I'm sure I shall know it when I see it."

Even Penny was now disheartened. To mark a map and explore each street in a car had sounded easy enough but Harriet was now so keen that she wanted to explore every side turning on foot. Another thing was that Judith was not very good with a map and as Wilson was getting more and more impatient they began to squabble.

"Never knew a woman yet who could read a map or fold a newspaper," he grumbled as Judith said something about taking the second turning on the left after passing an entrance to Robertson Square round which they had already crawled. "If I'd had any sense I'd have made this trip by myself."

A long silence followed this horrid and unjustified remark and even the impetuous Penny choked back the obvious answer. Then, as if this wasn't enough, their near side front tyre ran over something sharp and went flat with a despairing wail. Wilson stopped the car and put his hands to his head in despair.

"Serve me right," he said with a wry smile. "May this be a judgment on me. I've been getting more and more bad-tempered and now I've got to do the one thing I hate more than anything else in the world. I've got to change a wheel." He turned to Judith. "Forgive me for being so rude, darling. I ought to have confessed to you before I asked you to marry me that I am useless at everything mechanical. I dare say we shall be here until dawn or until we are rescued by friendly policemen or a breakdown van from a garage. I may never get my story now, and I think you girls ought to go away and leave me with my wretched thoughts."

Penny and Judith laughed but Harriet still looked scared. She was finding it difficult to understand these new friends.

"There's something I haven't told you," Judith smiled. "I'm quite good at cars and if you're a good boy you can help me to change the wheel."

They rummaged about in the boot until they found the jack.

At last they got the wheel off and the spare wheel on, but when they lowered the jack they saw to their horror that this seemed to have a puncture too, for the tyre was nearly flat.

"It's worse than a nightmare because it's real," Wilson moaned. "Why did I think that three young women might bring me luck? And why, oh why, my lovely little bride-to-be, do you not see that your spare wheels are full of air?"

But now Judith was near to angry tears.

"Don't be a fool, Jimmy. I've got a pump somewhere. We'll pump it up."

She found the pump at last under the back seat, but by the time they set out cautiously for Arcadia Street, praying that the new tyre was not really punctured, they were nearly three-quarters of an hour late.

"What will they think has happened to us?" Penny wondered. "We've failed them. They may have gone somewhere else."

"They'll never guess what happened," Wilson said through clenched teeth. "How could they? Before they went off it's possible that they had some respect and affection for us all, but they won't have after hearing our dismal and shameful story."

"Now you're talking like a journalist," Judith said. "I'm going to try and break you of that sort of thing... The next turning on the right should be Arcadia Street so with any luck we shall find the boys."

As soon as they turned the corner Harriet jumped in excitement.

"I remember this. Honestly I do. I believe we're quite near. I remember following Slinky down this street. Please stop and let me out. You come too, Penny, 'cos I seem to remember a dark turning on the right."

"O.K. O.K.," Wilson sighed. "We'll just cruise up and down and if you see the boys please send them back to the car. We'll keep you in sight."

Harriet grabbed Penny's arm as soon as they were on the pavement.

"I'm sure I'm right. I remember these coloured doors and some of them look like very expensive shops... Look, Penny. There's one. It's just got one hat in the window and it's called CHRISTABEL... *Penny! Here's the dark street.* I'm sure of it."

She waved excitedly to the others in the car behind them and then dragged Penny into South Tenby Street.

"This is it, Penny. The entrance is on the left just by that lamp. Come on. I'm not frightened now."

At that minute the big car edged out of Tenby Mews. The driver switched on the headlights as it accelerated. "That's the car!" Harriet screamed. "It's coming at us again, Penny," and she dragged the older girl on to the pavement

The car passed them. "It was a woman driving, Harry. Did you recognize her?"

"I can't be sure. Come and see the ladder now. I must prove that I was right about that."

Penny was looking very unhappy and worried. It was ridiculous, of course, but as the car had passed she thought that she had seen Jon in the back, next to a big man. It was only a glimpse in the dark, but it had seemed that they were struggling. Impossible, of course, but worrying; and it was rather odd that they hadn't seen the boys in Arcadia Street. Then Harriet ran ahead into the mews and in the pale light from the lamp saw Jon's envelope on the cobbles and picked it up.

"It's a message from them," she cried and ran over to the lamp. Penny followed, and as soon as she read it she knew that the boys had been captured.

"Where are the others? We must follow that big car. Jon and David were in the back," and she raced out into the street with Harriet breathless behind

her. Wilson was trying to turn his car into South Tenby Street and Judith was running towards them.

"That woman nearly ran us down," she gasped. "She cut across the pavement. I thought the boys were in the back. Jimmy is going to follow her. Come on."

The three tumbled into the back of the car as Wilson got straight and roared up to Arcadia Street. He turned left after the other car and then said over his shoulder,

"It's a green Humber Hawk. Did you get the number, Judith? It was all I could do to avoid her, and there would have been a first class crash if she hadn't gone across the pavement."

"It was DSS 101 and I saw David struggling with a big man at the back."

"And I saw Jon struggling too as soon as they came out of the mews," said Penny. "They nearly ran us down. We've found a message from the boys. They say they're sure it's Ballinger and that they're being taken away. We didn't have time to see the fire escape, but Harry is sure that was the place and Jon's message proves it, surely?" and she read out the printed words.

By now they had reached the southern end of Arcadia Street where the road finished, and Wilson turned to the right. Almost as far ahead as they could see were traffic lights. Judith leaned forward and beat her knees with her fists in excitement.

"Fast as you can, darling. The lights are red and there are several big cars in front. One of them may be DSS. You weren't far behind and remember that they won't expect to be followed."

Wilson began to sing. He liked driving and he liked excitement. From the despair of half an hour ago he now rose to heights of optimism as he roared and rattled down the street, certain that he was going to catch the Humber. He nearly did. The lights changed again as he joined the queue of cars.

"I can see it," Harriet squeaked. "It's four ahead now. We will rescue Jon and David, won't we? Don't let DSS get away, please."

"Try not," Wilson said as he let in the clutch. "I'll try to get close enough for you to look into the back window but it's too dark to see much. Don't worry. We're on the trail now. Tally ho!"

"I don't think this is funny," Penny said. "I'm worried. None of you seems to be fussing about those boys. Can't you realize that they must have been captured?"

Wilson was trying hard to close the gap between the two cars as the big Humber turned to the right into Sloane Street and headed towards Chelsea.

Judith turned to Penny. "I know what you mean, but we must find out where they're going if we can. Surely they wouldn't really hurt the boys?"

"You said yourself that you saw a big man struggling with David and I thought I saw Jon, too. Seems to me that they've taken the boys off because we've found out too much... DSS is gaining on us."

"I know," Wilson agreed. "If she's going down King's Road there are several sets of traffic lights."

They swept round Sloane Square with the Humber still about fifty yards ahead, but in spite of the lights they never got close enough to see inside the car.

"Where does this road lead?" Penny asked.

"It will take us to Putney Bridge over the Thames," Judith explained. "If they go up Putney High Street it might mean that they're making for the Portsmouth Road... Now, Jimmy darling. Now you can close up."

Wilson saw his chance as one of the three cars between them and the Humber turned left out of the stream of traffic, but even as he accelerated a small boy ran across the road. Judith screamed and put her hands over her eyes as Wilson cursed and braked so that the already worn tyres screamed

on the road surface. The car stopped with a jerk and the boy dashed to safety. Wilson wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

Wilson pulled the starter and accelerated again but they had lost the race now. The lights were against them at the next stop and the Humber not in sight.

"I'll try to get over the bridge just in case the luck is with us," Wilson said. "If we've lost them I suppose we'd better go back and think of something else. Police maybe. I've been saving that, although I've got a good friend at Scotland Yard."

"We'd better do something quickly for the boys," Penny said chokily. "Somebody had better ring up Brownlow Square too, and it's not going to be me."

Another red light checked them at the turning just before Putney Bridge and while they were waiting Wilson turned and smiled at Penny.

"Cheer up, girl," he said. "This isn't at all like you. I'm going to turn round here and go back. "Let's use our brains. I think they're on the run too, but I don't want to go back to Arcadia Street and climb that ladder to look for another clue."

Harriet, who had not spoken for ten minutes, sat up suddenly.

"P'raps that's what Jon and David did? P'raps they climbed the ladder and were captured? I wish I knew what had happened to Grandpa and the twins. I bet they want to know where we are."

"Yes," Penny agreed. "We must ring up Mr. Morton... Listen, James. I've got an idea. You remember Mr. Harry Hartman and his shop near Fleet Street? You remember how he was friendly to us when you proved that he was being swindled and told him that your paper might pay for his help because you want a good story?"

"Yes, Penny. I do. He's on our side now."

"I think so too. You remember I asked him to describe the girl who sold him the flower prints? She called herself Miss D. Smith, but you agree with me that she might be Ballinger's niece Valerie. He couldn't seem to remember what she looked like, but we do know that it wasn't Slinky who was trying to sell him faked pictures... Now this is it, James, and I do hope you can remember better than I can. Just before we went I'm sure one of us asked Mr. Hartman about his customer. Who she was, I mean."

"You're right, Penny. You asked him and he said she was a young film star staying at the Trocadero and it won't take me long to find out her name and whether she's still there. But how can she help us?"

"I believe I know what Penny means," Judith said excitedly. "You're wondering who recommended this American girl to go to a small shop off Fleet Street, aren't you, Penny?"

"That's it! I'm not sure but I believe Mr. Hartman said that this girl told him that somebody most unlikely had sent her to him, but I can't be sure... Let's go straight to Bellfields Street and ask Mr. Hartman the film star's name, and then go on to the Trocadero and speak to her."

Wilson whistled with admiration.

"Good girl, Penny. You mean that the gang is not only manufacturing forgeries and placing them in suitable shops, but may be recommending such shops to suitable customers?"

"That's right. I may be imagining all this, but I believe Mr. Hartman will remember and it won't take long to tell him what's happening. It would be better to ask him first before we go to the hotel, I'm sure."

"Good!" Wilson agreed. "Let's do that. Hartman told me that he lived over the shop. If he's out we'll go over to the *Clarion* and I'll do some telephoning from there... Tally ho!"

"What I hate about all this is that we're going away from Jon and David," Penny said. "I wonder where they are now?" But none of them could

answer that question, and a quarter of an hour later they were pulling up outside Mr. Hartman's shop.

"He's in," Judith said, pointing up to two lighted windows. "Are you going in by yourself, Jimmy?"

"I'll take Penny. She had the bright idea. You look after Harriet because we're going to be in a hurry if Hartman can give us the link we want. Come on, Redhead."

Penny didn't think that Wilson was worrying enough about the boys, but she couldn't help admiring the way in which he set about his job.

Mr. Hartman, in a black velvet smoking jacket, opened the door but Wilson gave him no opportunity to say how surprised he was to see them. He shook him warmly by the hand, reintroduced himself and Penny and begged for five minutes of his time.

"You remember us, Mr. Hartman? Good! We're thankful to find you in. Much depends on your memory and what you can tell me about your customer for the Johnson's flower prints..."

While speaking he pressed gently forward until Mr. Hartman found himself retreating into his shop. Penny closed the door gently behind them and listened fascinated as Wilson told his tale.

"I can promise you that my paper is going to appreciate your help, Mr. Hartman. Don't worry about that side of it. We're as sure as we can be that prospective customers are being recommended to go to shops such as yours where a faked print has already been sold - or offered. See what we mean? Good. Penny here remembers you saying something about an American woman buying the print and wanting more. I must see this woman as soon as I can and ask her who gave her your name. That's the point, Mr. Hartman. *Why did she come to you?* Can you help us?"

Mr. Hartman sat down suddenly. He didn't like fuss and excitement and was sure that he was going to suffer for this, but this extraordinary young man was very insistent

"Very well," he said. "I can tell you. My client is Miss Lucinda Gray and she is still at the Trocadero Hotel. She is American. I'm sure she told me that she had been recommended to me but I doubt if she told me by whom. Is there anything else I can do to help you?"

"*Lucinda Gray!*" Penny whispered. "But she's wonderful, isn't she, Mr. Hartman?"

"She is both charming and beautiful, my dear."

"Of course she is. She's news," Wilson snapped. "Nip out, Penny, and tell Judith we'll be off to the Trocadero just as soon as I've made some telephone calls. I must make sure she's there first... Thank you, Mr. Hartman. May I telephone from your office, please? Most grateful!" and as Penny ran to the door he was still talking over his shoulder to Mr. Hartman.

"He's wonderful when he's on the job," she laughed as she got in beside Judith and told her the rest of the story.

Then Judith turned the car and was ready for Wilson when he dashed out of the shop.

"She's still at the Trocadero and by a stroke of luck she's in the hotel now. Let's get there quickly. I've spoken to her and she'll see me," he said, as he got in. "Hurry, beautiful."

"We can't all troop into the Trocadero like a circus," Judith said as she drove into Fleet Street and turned west again. "Who's going to have the honour of coming with you to see the glamorous Lucinda? I think I should."

"So you shall, honey. Remember that all American film stars like the Press. We're lucky that she's there. She said something about going out to supper presently. Park as near to the hotel as you can."

"I'm going to drive right up to the entrance and I'm then going to park all amongst the Rolls Royces. Penny and Harriet can stay in the car and see that nobody steals it."

Ten minutes later they swept up behind an enormous cream car to the Trocadero. A porter in a smart uniform opened the car door, saluted as Wilson got out and then told Judith where to park.

"We'll be as quick as we can," she said to the girls. "Please don't mind us deserting you but I think I can help Jimmy this time."

"I'd give anything to see Lucinda," Penny said. "But do please hurry, Judith. The boys may be miles away and the Mortons don't know what has happened and Harriet is worried about her grandfather."

"We've got to be quick," Judith promised. "We'll have to telephone the others as soon as we know whether Lucinda can help us. Don't leave the car," and she ran across to the revolving doors of the hotel and saw Wilson standing by the head porter's desk.

"Miss Gray will see you, sir," he was saying as she came up. Then he called a page and told him to take them up to the actress's suite.

"I'm not dressed for this hotel," Judith whispered as they followed the boy over soft carpets to the lift. "You don't look very clean or tidy either, but I suppose your charm will get you by. What are you going to tell her?"

"If she's the sort of girl I think she is I shall tell her everything. Here we go."

Miss Gray's suite was on the first floor. She opened the door to them herself and gave them the famous smile of welcome.

Wilson introduced Judith as his fiancée.

"I know we're lucky to find you in, Miss Gray, and it's kind of you to see me. As I told you on the telephone from Mr. Hartman's shop in Bellfields Street, I've got important news and I'm sure you can help us. It is urgent though and it may be a police job as well."

Lucinda was wearing a tweed suit and looking lovely.

"Sounds exciting, Mr. Wilson. Come right in and tell me your story. I have a press agent but he's out now having a rest from Lucinda Gray. We have to go to a supper party later... I like your paper, Mr. Wilson. I see it every day."

She led the way into an expensively-furnished sitting-room and offered them cigarettes and drinks. Then she smiled at Judith and said, "Truth is I'm bored tonight, but as I don't have much time to myself I thought I might relax for an hour. Are you on the *Clarion* too?"

Judith shook her head. "Oh no. I'm an artist and I'm interested in what's happening to all the Johnson's flower prints, and that's what Jimmy wants to tell you about."

Lucinda raised her eyebrows.

"I'll be real interested to hear what you have to say. These flower pictures are cute."

Wilson told their story as briefly as he could and she only interrupted once when he told her that they now knew that most of these pictures were clever fakes.

"This is where you can help us, Miss Gray," he went on. "Who suggested that you could buy a Johnson from Harry Hartman? He is nearly sure that you told him that you'd been recommended to go to him. Can you remember who it was? I'm sure that this racket is being run by a gang and I'm out to get the exclusive story for the *Clarion*. Two young friends who have been helping me have just been abducted by this gang, so I must tell the police now, but I believe you have the clue we need."

Lucinda watched him wide-eyed.

"You mean that you're working on this story right now, Mr. Wilson? You're after this gang yourself?"

"With some young friends, two of whom are waiting outside in the car. We're after them as soon as we know where to go. Can you help us, Miss Gray?"

"I surely can and I'd like to help you get your story. I've been waiting for something like this ever since I landed in your country, but you're going to be real disappointed in what I tell you. Mr. Hartman's name was given to me by Madame Christabel who designs my clothes. Maybe you've heard of her? I was asking her what I could take back home that was rare, and she showed me one of her own Johnson's flower prints."

"Where does she live?" Judith asked. "I've heard the name."

"It's a cute little street. I've got her card somewhere." She went over to a bureau and rummaged in one of the pigeon-holes. "Here you are, Mr. Wilson... 59, Arcadia Street-----"

Wilson and Judith jumped from their chairs.

"That's it!" James shouted. "That's the clue. May I see the card?"

He whirled on Judith. "Look at this, Judy. Another address. 243, High Street, Guildford. The car was going over Putney Bridge, wasn't it? I bet they were going to Guildford down the Portsmouth Road. This is just what we want and young Penny, bless her, put us both on the trail... May I use your telephone please, Miss Gray? I want my paper and the police must be told before we go to Guildford, and somebody ought to tell the Mortons. Get Penny, Judy, and fix that up between you," and even before he had finished speaking he had grabbed Lucinda's telephone.

The American girl turned to Judith.

"Gee, but this is wonderful! Where is this Guildford? I'm coming with you. Never mind my supper party, my dear. I'll leave a message. Tell your boy friend I'm coming with you. Who's this Penny?"

Judith wasn't sure that she wanted the beautiful Lucinda to come with them, but there was no time to argue.

"Come if you like then. Help us to find another telephone downstairs." Then, to Jimmy, "Meet us in the hall, darling. Miss Gray is coming with us."

Wilson waved a vague hand and the two girls went out together.

Ten minutes later they all met in the hall. Lucinda had already made friends with Harriet while Judith and Penny squeezed into the same telephone box to speak to Mr. Morton. This had been a very difficult conversation, and Penny looked white and unhappy when she came out to find Wilson waiting for them.

"Who did you speak to? What did you tell them?"

Judith answered for her.

"Mr. Morton is very angry but I spoke to him as well. I told him that we've called in the police and that we're sure the boys have been taken to Guildford. He says that he's driving there now and will meet us at Guildford Police Station. He'll bring Mr. Sparrow and I bet the twins will come too. He's not very pleased with you, Jimmy - nor me either."

"I'll explain to him later. He'll understand. Who's going to drive now, Judy? We're in a hurry."

"I am," she said firmly. "We'll get there just as quickly... Most of the people in this hotel seem to be watching us."

"They're watching Lucinda," Penny said as the film star spoke to the hall porter. "We don't look like the Trocadero, do we? Do let's go."

Harriet, looking very bewildered, took her hand and made for the entrance. She stared straight ahead as a page boy winked at her and pushed the revolving doors.

"You're going to be very surprised when you see our car," Judith said grimly to Lucinda as they followed. "I can't think why you're doing this."

"I know you can't. I'm crazy. You can't realize that I spend most of my life being ordered about. I guess you're all crazy too, and I like it. You can tell me how it all started on the way."

She didn't laugh when she saw the car. She even seemed impressed by the idea that it would go. Judith and Wilson sat in front and Lucinda with the two girls behind. Judith drove fast and they were crossing Putney Bridge before Wilson had got very far with his story.

"My paper is now in touch with Scotland Yard," he went on as the old car roared down the Kingston by-pass. "We're going straight to Guildford. I hope the police will have news for us about Christabel who we believe to be a woman called Ballinger that Penny here and her friends have come across before. I've met her too when she was running a smuggling racket on Romney Marsh. Describe Christabel to us, Miss Gray."

Lucinda did so and Penny looked puzzled.

"I s'pose it *could* be the Ballinger, but she never looked like that before. She was untidy and fat and tweedy."

"Fat women can lose weight," Jimmy laughed. "She's just smartened herself up and disguised herself. She was an artist and she ran an antique furniture business too. It all fits in."

"But Christabel is real famous," Lucinda protested. "Her clothes are tops. How can she run this other business?"

"We don't know, but I bet she does. I'm sure we'll find that she's recommended old prints to many of her clients. I'm certain we're right."

"These boys you say have been kidnapped?" Lucinda said quickly. "Tell me about them, Penny. Is one your brother?"

Penny was glad it was dark.

"No. Jon is my cousin and David is our friend. I feel very bad about them."

"Gee. That's too bad. Don't worry, honey."

But Penny did worry, and she was still worrying as they drove slowly down Guildford's steep, cobbled High Street and were directed to the Police Station. Wilson went in alone and while they were waiting impatiently Mr.

Morton drove up with Mr. Sparrow, the twins and Macbeth. Penny ran across to Mr. Morton as he got out of the car and tried to explain. He was looking very stern but as soon as she told him that Wilson was with the police he smiled.

"We'll soon get this fixed, Penny. Stop worrying and look after the twins. They refused to stay with their mother and it seems that they've been in trouble too."

Mr. Sparrow and the twins were then introduced to Lucinda. The twins had both slept in the car and were now on the top of their form and anxious to re-tell their dramatic story. Mr. Sparrow was delighted to see them all and Lucinda was charmed by him, but she found it difficult to understand the relationship between all these nice people. She was not usually at a loss for words but the twins' dual act kept her speechless.

At last Wilson and Mr. Morton came running down the steps.

"Get into the car," the former hissed. "We haven't dared to tell them we've got a mixed school with us. It's O.K. We're after them and the police say not to worry about Jon and David. They daren't hurt them. They haven't seen the car but DSS could almost have been in Guildford by the time the *Clarion* telephoned them... The woman who calls herself Christabel is really a Mrs. Sandford. She has a good shop here but she lives about six miles away in a big house on White Sands Heath. The police are leading the way in a car and I've told them I must be there to get my story, and Mr. Morton must be there because of the boys. Don't let the police see the twins or Harriet. You're not looking very old tonight, Penny, either."

"I feel a hundred, but we're all coming," she smiled. "I want to help rescue the boys, and nothing anybody can do or say is going to stop us."

The three cars moved off and Wilson, on edge with excitement, said to Lucinda, "I bet you've never acted in a picture like this! We'd never have traced this woman if Penny hadn't thought of finding you. How do you like England, Lucinda? I'll have a story from you about tonight in tomorrow's paper."

"It's real wonderful and I'll say you're not so slow, either. Why are your roads so narrow?"

Nobody could answer that question as Guildford was left behind. After ten minutes fast driving they climbed a long hill dark in the shadows of whispering pines, and then found themselves crossing a wild and lonely common. The moon was up now and the police car stopped when it reached a clump of pine trees on the right of the road. They then saw that the spinney was surrounded by a brick wall and beyond the trees there loomed the bulk of a huge house.

Wilson, followed by Mr. Morton and Mr. Sparrow, got out and went to speak to the detective. When he came back to Judith's car he brought the twins with him.

"Sorry and all that," he said. "But I've promised this detective chap that you'll all stay in the car here. These people might be dangerous. We're going up to the front door and see what happens. It's too bad for you, I know, but you must see we can't all go."

"I can," Lucinda said as she got out. "You'll want me to identify Christabel and anyway I kinda think your police can't order me about because I'm an American citizen. I'm coming. Mr. Sparrow will look after me if nobody else will,"

Wilson shrugged his shoulders and pretended that he couldn't see how furious Judith was. She was indeed so angry that she was speechless. But the twins protested loudly until Penny told them to be quiet when the detective and the police driver came up. Wilson explained about Lucinda and rather grudgingly they agreed that she should go with the men.

Penny watched them open the gates across the drive and walk in and then said, "Do as you like, Judith, but I'm not going to put up with that. I'm going to explore the back of the house and see whether there are any lights in the downstairs windows. I'm going to find Jon and David. Coming, twins?"

13. Wilson's Story

"Coming, twins?" Penny whispered urgently. "Quiet as you can. What about Harry and Judith?"

Dickie and Mary jumped out first with Mackie on his lead. Then Judith recovered her sense of humour and followed with Harriet.

"Of course we're coming. Let the men get farther ahead."

Penny took the lead. The drive which led to the house was dark under the trees although the moon was high, but they were just able to distinguish the shadowy forms of the five men and Lucinda Gray about a hundred yards ahead.

"I suppose they know what they're doing?" Judith whispered. "Surely they won't go to the front door together, leaving our cars unguarded?"

"Never mind what they do," Mary said. "They'll talk an' talk, but they're not Lone Piners. We're the ones who have got to find Jon and David. Come on, Penny. Let's go to the back of the house and see what's happening there."

They raced through the trees, their feet silent on the soft carpet of pine needles, and then across a lawn by the side of the house until they came to a gate in a wall.

Macbeth strained at his lead as Dickie ran ahead when Penny pushed back the gate. Down a brick-paved path they ran and then through another door on to a terrace running along the back of the big house. Penny stopped suddenly and the others banged into her. Ten yards ahead a beam of light was shining through a gap in the curtains drawn across some french windows.

"I'll go with the twins," Penny whispered. "Look after Harry, Judith."

The three Lone Piners with Mackie crept forward together. When they reached the windows Penny gestured to the twins to keep back while she

knelt to look into the room. What she saw made her forget all her fears of the last few hours. Her first feeling was of relief and a certain amount of triumph, but this was soon swamped by a surge of anger.

She was looking into a large room furnished as a library. All the lights were blazing and an electric fire glowed in the hearth. With their backs to the windows were standing a woman in a fur coat and with a beautifully groomed head of blue-rinsed hair, and an enormous man wearing a black jacket and striped trousers. Beyond these two and facing Penny as she peered through the glass, were Jon and David. Each was bound to a kitchen chair. David looked white and strained and his lips were bruised and swollen, while Jon was struggling against his bonds and shaking his head. To her horror Penny noticed that his spectacles were on the floor by his feet and that blood was trickling from the corner of his swollen right eye.

"The boys are in there," she shouted to the others as she lifted a flat piece of stone. "They're being tortured."

Then with a strength she did not know she possessed, she staggered to the doors and crashed the stone against the glass so that it shattered and fell about her feet. With another blow she smashed the lock and stormed into the room with Macbeth barking wildly at her heels and the twins just behind.

Ballinger and Louis wheeled round, but seemed to be paralysed with surprise as children, dog, and Judith in the rear rushed into the room.

"It's all right, Jon," Penny shouted. "We're here. You're safe now. The police are here, too."

Then she faced up to Louis, who loomed above her.

"As for you," she stormed, "you unspeakable fat bully. You were hitting them when they were tied up. Yes, you were, and you've knocked his specs off."

"Up the Lone Piners!" David yelled through swollen lips as Mackie flew at Louis and bit his ankle.

"Fetch the men," Penny shouted to Judith and then Mary rushed across to David and flung her arms round him, while Dickie, white with excitement, stayed just inside the room and pointed accusingly at the woman. In a sudden lull they heard his clear little voice. "You look different. You've done things to yourself. You've coloured your hair and you're not so fat as you used to be, but we remember those specs. We've found you again. You're Miss Ballinger."

That broke the spell. Louis dashed for the door and Ballinger followed him, deliberately pushing Jon's chair over as she passed. They slammed and locked the door behind them.

Penny and the twins pulled Jon and his chair upright again and while Dickie searched frantically for his pocket knife; Penny, on her knees, picked up Jon's spectacles and wiped the blood tenderly from his cut eye with her finger, because she had no handkerchief.

"Thanks, Penny," he said shakily. "That was a good entrance of yours and just in time... You're crying, you silly little girl."

"You great lout," she sobbed. "I'm not. I'm laughing at you both because you look so silly."

Then Dickie began to hack at the thin ropes which were binding their wrists and ankles to the chairs. He first freed David, who stood up and stretched and then gave Mary a hug as Wilson led a rush of grown-ups into the room.

"It's Ballinger and a big man called Louis," said David. "They went out through that door and locked us in. If you want to catch them look for a Humber Hawk DSS 101... Gosh! That looks like Dad," and he sat down suddenly.

"It is," Mr. Morton said grimly as he pushed his way through the crowd. "Are you all right, boy?"

David nodded. "All right really. They were just beginning to get mad with us. Penny got here in time. Trust her! Sorry if we've worried you, Dad. We got rather caught up in things. Hullo, Harriet! And there's Judith - and

somebody very beautiful I've never seen before... Anyway, James, we've got the full story of Arcadia Street for you, and if I were you I'd search this place thoroughly."

The detective in a belted coat standing behind Mr. Morton gave the two boys a quick smile and then spoke to his driver, who hurried out on to the terrace.

"They won't get far," he said. "We've got radio in the car."

"I guess you'll want it, mister," Lucinda Gray put in.

"I'm tickled to death to watch you guys at work, but I heard a car going flat out down the drive just now. Pity we didn't leave someone round at the front."

The detective looked justifiably annoyed. He had been thinking the same thing and wasn't very proud of himself. Wilson saved him from giving Lucinda an answer.

"We've got to search the house, sergeant," he pleaded. "You know what we've got to prove. This woman who now calls herself Mrs. Sandford may have been living an innocent enough life down here, but I doubt it. These boys have found something important at Arcadia Street and they'd better tell us while we search. It will save time if we break the lock of this door, won't it? Somebody else may be in the house, so the girls and the twins had better stay here. Will you look after them, Mr. Sparrow?"

"No, Mr. Wilson," he said firmly. "I will not stay here with these young people because I am certain they will refuse to do so. If that detestable man from whom I rescued the twins some hours ago is really an accomplice of the woman who has just escaped us, I think there may be something interesting to be found in this house. It is possible that the master prints of the forged pictures come from here, but we have yet to hear Jon and David's story. I suggest we search the house together. These youngsters have done more than most of us to bring these criminals to justice."

They all laughed and Lucinda clapped as the detective attacked the lock with a heavy poker.

"We don't believe there's anyone else in the house," Jon said. "Ballinger unlocked the front door when we arrived and didn't ring a bell for servants. The big bully Louis locked us in the garage for a few minutes and then tied us up one by one. There wasn't much we could do. He's a giant"

"Never mind about that now," David put in. "They'll want to know about the penthouse," and he went on to tell them of their discoveries and of how they had been hurried off after Ballinger had received a telephone call.

"That would be the man the twins call Slinky," Mr. Sparrow said. "As soon as we had discovered his workshop and he knew that he had been recognized, he would obviously ring up and warn his employer."

Wilson nodded agreement as the detective and Mr. Morton forced open the door. Lights in the hall and on the landings were still burning. It was a big house and they examined each room thoroughly. There was no fire in the kitchen range, and not much food in the pantries. Dining-room, drawing-room, study and breakfast-room on the ground floor were all well-furnished and nothing suspicious nor unusual was to be found in them. They were clean and free of dust and wood fires were laid in two of them. In the hall the telephone wires had been wrenched out of their connection and the receiver thrown to the ground and smashed.

They searched bathrooms and bedrooms and found nothing until the men, Lucinda and Judith had explored a small bedroom and moved out so that the Lone Piners could go in. There was nothing special to see, but Macbeth stopped in front of some fitted cupboards and growled softly.

Jon and David looked at each other.

"The secret passage led from a bedroom cupboard in Arcadia Street," he whispered. "Listen," and he opened the doors of the cupboard as wide as they would go, to disclose a man's dressing-gown, two tweed jackets and a top coat on hangers. But the dog was still agitated. He whined softly, put his

head on one side and then walked into the cupboard and sniffed at the floor. Then he growled and barked sharply.

"I bet there's a hidden door here somewhere. Fetch the men, Dickie," David said.

While her twin was away. Mary crawled into the cupboard and felt with her fingers a thin crack in the wall. Mackie barked again as she crawled out with her news. The detective had a torch and he asked Mary to hold it while he tried to find the catch or a slit which might well be a keyhole. He tapped softly and the sound was undoubtedly hollow.

"The dog can hear something that we can't," he whispered, and Mary said, "Of course he can! He's that sort of beautiful little dog. He's beautiful as well as clever. Aren't you going to smash down the secret door, Mr. Detective? We've done nearly everything for you so far an'-----"

"That's enough, Mary," her father said and added, rather unnecessarily, "It's time you were in bed... Let's have your murderous-looking knife, Dickie, and we'll run the blade down that slit."

Dickie handed it over and squeezed into the cupboard behind Summers. Mackie barked furiously again as the detective got to work.

Suddenly there was a click and the door opened inwards. Mary swung the beam of the torch round and they saw a few steep steps of brick leading down. There was a curious smell of chemicals as a current of cold air blew into the stuffy cupboard.

"You twins get back and give me the torch," the detective ordered. "Mr. Morton and Mr. Wilson behind me, please."

Grumbling and muttering, the twins and Macbeth withdrew and their father and the journalist took their places.

"What is it, twinnies?" Lucinda pleaded. "What's there?"

"Steps all drippin' with slime leadin' to stinkin' dungeons," Dickie said and licked his lips. "We found them. It's always the same. Dad says we mustn't boast, but because we haven't met you before we think you ought to know... Somebody is making a lot of noise down in the dungeons. What's happening?"

"You can all come," Mr. Morton's voice loomed from the cupboard. "We've found her workshop."

The twins pushed ahead. There was enough light now for them to see that the steps led straight down into a sort of laboratory or workshop. The floor was of rubber and in the middle of it was a pile of smashed glass and twisted metal. At the far end a casement window was wide open and Mr. Morton was standing by it.

"There's an iron fire escape outside here. Summers saw a woman half-way down and has gone after her... Look round you, Wilson, and I think you'll agree that you owe a lot to these boys and girls."

"Yes, sir, I do. And to Judith, too, who has stuck by me since the beginning believing that I was on to something. And to Mr. Sparrow, whose life we've upset, who has come on the trail with us tonight and never grumbled, and to you too, sir, who haven't been too hard on me for allowing this grand lot to run into danger... That's my big speech. Now let's see what we've found. This is going to show Mr. Sparrow how the master - or is it mistress? - forger gets to work!"

There was enough evidence in this hidden room to prove that it was the laboratory of a very skilful forger. There were cameras and lighting equipment, metal sinks and shallow trays filled with acid. In a cupboard Wilson found engraved copper plates used for printing, cans of printing ink and rubber rollers. Dickie was wildly excited when he found an enormous magnifying glass on a stand, but it was Wilson himself who discovered that part of the bench, on which Penny was sitting, lifted, and then raised up on some system of counterpoised weights a perfect little printing press.

"I've got all I want now," he said to Mr. Morton. "We'll send a photographer in the morning, but I must get back right away. What about you, Mr.

Sparrow? It wouldn't be difficult to be taken in by someone as clever as the Ballinger, would it? I wonder if they've got her."

"We'll go and see," Mr. Morton said as he led the way out through the bedroom cupboard. "We must find a telephone quickly and let Mrs. Morton know that all is well and that we're on our way home."

They met Summers in the hall.

"Got her," he said. "She's in our car and we'll have her back at the station in ten minutes. A nasty woman with a nasty tongue... If you'll follow us to the station we'll find hot drinks for you, and you all can use our telephones."

At last the telephoning was over and Detective-Sergeant Summers came out to see them off. Wilson and Mr. Morton drove fast with most of their passengers asleep, and it wasn't until they reached Putney Bridge that Wilson jumped out and hailed a solitary taxi. Then he ran over to Mr. Morton.

"I must go back to the office now, sir. Judith is going to drive Lucinda, Mr. Sparrow and Harriet home, but I told her that I'd ask if you could put her up at Brownlow Square for what's left of the night. I'll ring you in the morning if I may, and come up and see you all. Thank you all. Cheerio!" and he jumped into the taxi, which rumbled off towards Fulham Road and Fleet Street.

And so they came home and were scolded and fussed over by Mrs. Morton and sent to bed just when London's earliest workers were starting out on another day. Penny waited for Judith, who was to share her bed, but they had little to say to each other when she arrived. They slept as soon as their heads touched the pillow and did not wake until Mrs. Morton brought them some tea at eleven o'clock.

"I've just told the boys," she said after she had kissed Penny, "and I'm going to tell you, too, Penny, that this is the very last time that I'm going to allow you all to get mixed up with the police and crime. I can't stand the strain. Sooner or later you will have to see Jon and David's faces, and although they won't tell me how they got like that I shall find out eventually. Good

morning, Judith. That wild young man of yours has already been on the telephone twice and is now on his way here in a taxi. He says that he's bringing with him a film star called Lucinda Gray - at least that's what it sounded like, although I can hardly believe it. And Mr. Sparrow has telephoned to say that Harriet wants to see us all, so I asked her to lunch too... Now I'm going to leave you two girls in charge of the house while I go and buy pounds and pounds of cold meat and tins of soup for lunch."

Penny reached up and hugged her.

"None of our adventures would be worth while if you weren't at the end of them," she said. "We're all very sorry if we've made you anxious, but when you hear the full story I know you'll understand. Really it began because Jon and I wanted to buy you a glass paper-weight. Don't worry. We'll get up and lay the table, but please get the boys up before you go."

Wilson and Lucinda arrived in a taxi before the twins were down or Mrs. Morton back. Lucinda had an enormous bunch of spring flowers and Jimmy a bundle of *Clarions* under his arm. He kissed Judith soundly, kissed Percy before she could protest, and then smiled sympathetically at the sight of the boys' discoloured faces. Then Harriet arrived, and he kissed her too, and just as he was asking for Mrs. Morton the telephone rang. David answered it.

"It's for you, James. Scotland Yard. Let's look at the paper while you're talking."

Across the front page of the *Clarion* ran a banner headline:

FORGED PICTURES RACKET

AMAZING DISCLOSURES AS YARD NET CLOSES ROUND GANG

Exclusive story by our Crime Reporter James Wilson

They snatched a paper each and read Wilson's effort. It was an exciting and well-written story. Lucinda was mentioned - and there was a wonderful photograph of her.

Mr. Hartman's help was also acknowledged with a picture of his shop in Bellfields Street.

"Not bad, is it?" Wilson said as he came back into the room. "They've done me proud and no other paper has got a line. Our next edition will have more pictures of the house at White Sands Heath... Hullo. Here are the twins, looking rather the worse for wear."

Dickie and Mary stood side by side in the doorway with Macbeth between them. They looked disapprovingly at the crowded room and then yawned together. Then,

"Do you *all* live here now?" Mary asked coldly. "This is what always happens, twin. We find out everything. We do everything. We stay up all night. We rescue people that don't always deserve to be rescued. We do all that and then we sink into a sleep of *erzaustchun*, and what happens, twin?"

"We're not even fed. We're forgotten. Everybody meets and talks and writes about each other in papers, an' talks an' talks yakkity, yakkity, yak. Then we wake up and find we're alone, and we don't know which day it is or how many meals we've missed. Would somebody mind telling us where our mother is?"

Penny told them.

"Oh! We're hungry so p'raps that's a good idea. Where's Grandpa Sparrow?"

"At the shop, twins," Harriet said as she ran over to them. "He sent his kind regards, but I think he means his love. I haven't forgotten you. I think you were wonderful. I never knew that twins could be so brave and strong."

Jon groaned and Mary looked at him coldly, and then Mrs. Morton came back with two laden baskets and a bulging shopping bag. They all rushed to the door to help her and when she had sorted herself out Lucinda was introduced and presented her with the flowers.

Mrs. Morton flopped down in the nearest chair with her parcels round her and the lovely bouquet in her lap.

"I didn't believe Mr. Wilson when he said he was bringing a film star to lunch," she gasped. "You're very welcome, Miss Gray, but I think you'll find making a new picture really peaceful compared to eating with this menagerie. Thank you, my dear, for the flowers. We'll arrange them soon, but as the meal is cold but for soup and potatoes in their jackets, somebody had better tell me what I don't know of your adventures. My husband has told me all he knows, but I doubt if that's all... Sit down, twins, and stop looking aggrieved. This is going to be one of the times when you don't speak until someone asks you to do so."

"That'll be never," Dickie laughed. "Don't worry about us, Mum. Lucinda has asked us to go to Hollywood with her and make some twin pictures."

Lucinda looked appalled, as well she might, but David winked at his mother and said, "Little liars."

They relied on Wilson to give them a clear story, and he started by telling them that the police had just told him that Grandon had been taken at Harwich and Louis not many miles from London Airport.

"His name is Sandford, but we don't know yet how long he has been married to your Ballinger nor for how long she has been working this picture racket. The police believe that she may have been engaged in even more serious forgery. Bank notes, perhaps. We know she was destroying evidence as fast as she could last night. She hasn't spoken since she was caught, and the police haven't finished searching the Arcadia Street penthouse or the secret room at White Sands yet."

"I want to ask something, please," Lucinda interrupted. "How could this woman be Christabel while all this was going on?"

"I'm told that a successful forger always follows another profession as a blind and that he - in this case, she - should never attempt to sell his own work. Ballinger has always been clever and she seemed to know about clothes, although perhaps we shall find that the sinister Louis was the dress designer. I think Ballinger did the master-forging at White Sands at weekends and that her branch at Guildford was an excuse for extending her circle of likely customers for forgeries. The penthouse was used by artists

she employed to tint and then discolour the false prints which were her own work. Jon and David said that the men who worked for her had never met their employer and had no idea whether it was a man or a woman, or from where they received their orders. The police have probably got those two by now.

"As for Grandon, he's sure to talk. It's my guess he worked on commission, but it appears to have been his job to contact as many antique shops as possible. He's a poor specimen, but quite clever with his hands too. It seems he collected his faked pictures from the penthouse and no doubt he met the Ballinger there, and was one of the few members of the gang who knew her secret."

"What about the girl who called herself Miss D. Smith, who was Mr. Hartman's contact?" Penny asked. "She was doing the same as Slinky, I suppose? I'm sure she's Valerie."

"You can keep a look out for her, Penny," Wilson smiled. "The police are looking for her too, but I expect she's had the alarm by now."

"Were all the antique dealers innocent, I wonder?" Judith asked. "That place in Chelsea - Mervyn Brown in Boscombe Street - for instance? Penny and I detested that woman. I wouldn't be surprised if she knew those pictures were fakes."

"Neither would I. No doubt you'll be able to buy a Johnson's for next to nothing now that the secret is out... There's one other thing I want to say. None of your names appears in the paper because Mr. Morton made me promise that they should not. That doesn't mean I'm not grateful to you all. It was a lucky day for me when I met Penny in that shop in Boscombe Street."

There isn't much more to tell. They shared an enormous picnic meal round the dining-room table and then Wilson, Judith and Lucinda had to go. Lucinda promised them all seats at the premiere of her film in the West End in a week's time and said that she'd just had the most thrilling twenty-four hours of her life.

They stood on the steps to see the old car drive off and then Penny sighed and said, "What shall we do now? Almost anything will seem dull, won't it? I suppose Jon would like to go to a football match?"

"Acksherley, as Mary would say, acksherley not. David and I were thinking of going to the pictures if we can find a film with Lucinda in it."

"I'll come with you," Penny said brightly. "Just to double your pleasure. What about twinnies?"

"Acksherley," Mary said, "we are going out. We have accepted a most welcome invitation. We are going to tea with Harriet."

"We want to say something special to Harry," Dickie went on. "Please all come indoors before we go and we'll explain."

When they were round the fire in the sitting-room, Dickie and Mary stood each side of Harriet, who was looking rather scared.

"I think I know what you want to ask Harry," David said. "We all agree, don't we, that Harry's journey to Arcadia Street when she was following Slinky was the bravest thing any of us did. I think James ought to give her a medal."

"But I don't want *anything*," Harriet protested almost tearfully. "I just want to be friends with you all. I've never had such a wonderful time."

"She'll never get a medal," Penny laughed. "But I'm sure she ought to join us. The others up in Shropshire are sure to agree. Tell her all about it, twins. We'll call for you at Mr. Sparrow's on our way home."

The three elder ones went out while Harriet stared at the twins in amazement.

"But what do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"Would you swear to be true to us all whatever happens?" Mary said solemnly.

"Of course I would."

"Would you sign your name in your own blood on the dokkerment of rules?" Dickie asked.

"Oh yes, please."

"Would you like to join our most secret and solemn Society called The Lone Pine Club?"

"Please, twins."

"Good," said Mary. "That's jolly good, because we've fixed it. We'll tell you more about it when we're listening to The Bluebells of Scotland' at your place."

"We're glad," Dickie added. "We like you, Harry and this club of ours is utterly fantastic."

THE END